# PROMISE ME, AMERICA

JOE BIDEN

LITTLE BROWN
New York

9780316598484_PromiseMeAmerica_int_1P.indd 3 7/17/26 1:51 PM

Copyright © 2026 by Joe Biden

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted, in any form or by any means, without the prior written permission of the publisher, including any use or reproduction for the purpose of training artificial intelligence technologies. The publisher expressly reserves this work from the text and data mining exception in accordance with Article 4(3) DSM Directive 2019/790 and any other equivalent legislation in force from time to time or elsewhere.

If you would like permission to use material from the book (other than for review purposes), please contact permissions@hbgusa.com.

Little, Brown and Company
Hachette Book Group
1290 Avenue of the Americas, New York, NY 10104
littlebrown.com

First Edition: November 2026

Little, Brown and Company is a division of Hachette Book Group, Inc. The Little, Brown name and logo are trademarks of Hachette Book Group, Inc.

The publisher is not responsible for websites (or their content) that are not owned by the publisher.

The Hachette Speakers Bureau provides a wide range of authors for speaking events. To find out more, go to hachettespeakersbureau.com or email hachettespeakers@hbgusa.com.

Contact your local bookseller or special.markets@hbgusa.com regarding special discounts for bulk purchases.

ISBN 9780316598484
LCCN [TK]

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

LSC-C

Printed in the United States of America

# CONTENTS


PREFACE . . . . . xi

ONE: History Comes Knocking . . . . . 1

TWO: A Promise Kept . . . . . .27

THREE: Rescue . . . . . .65

FOUR: Taking On Trickle-Down . . . . . .85

FIVE: America's Back . . . . . 113

SIX: Afghanistan . . . . . 133

SEVEN; UKRAINE . . . . . .149

EIGHT; WAR . . . . . 169

NINE: A Season of Progress . . . . . 187

TEN: Indivisible . . . . . 219

ELEVEN" RAIL FORCE ONE . . . . . 233

TWELVE: October 7 . . . . . 255

THIRTEEN: A Summit in San Francisco . . . . . 277

FOURTEEN: Sacred Cause . . . . . 307

FIFTEEN: A Sprint to the Finish . . . . . 357

EPILOGUE: The Power of Our Example . . . . . 395

*Acknowledgments* . . . . . .411

*Notes* . . . . . .415

*Image Credits* . . . . . .455


HBG

CHAPTER ONE

# HISTORY COMES KNOCKING

JANUARY 6, 2021, WAS SHAPING UP TO BE A GOOD DAY.

At noon, a joint session of Congress would count the Electoral College votes, formalize my victory, and certify me as the forty-sixth president of the United States.

Shortly thereafter, I was planning to give a speech that would lay out my vision for how my administration was going to jump-start our economy and defeat the COVID-19 pandemic.

And to top it off, I had two congratulatory phone calls to make: In Georgia, Jon Ossoff and Raphael Warnock had both won their Senate runoff elections — a rare instance of concurrent elections, because Warnock had run to replace a senator who had resigned mid-term.

Their victories were significant. Not only were they the first Democrats to be elected from Georgia in twenty years, Warnock became the first-ever Black senator from Georgia. Ossoff became the first Jewish senator from Georgia.



9780316598484_PromiseMeAmerica_int_1P.indd 1 7/17/26 1:51 PM

And before their runoff victories, the balance of the Senate had stood at fifty Republicans, forty-six Democrats, and two independents who caucused with the Democrats. Now the Senate would effectively become fifty-fifty, giving the president of the Senate, the vice president of the United States, the tiebreaking vote. I would become president with a governing majority, albeit a vanishingly slim and frequently restive one.

I was at my house in Delaware that morning along with Ron Klain and Bruce Reed. I had known and worked with each of them for decades. Ron had been a law clerk for Supreme Court Justice Byron White, and I had brought him on to serve as chief counsel to the Senate Judiciary Committee when I was chairing that committee. Bruce is similarly brilliant, a Rhodes scholar whom I've known since the 1980s when I tried to hire him on my Senate staff. Bruce is not only a policy wonk, he's adept at finding the words to help explain those policies, befitting someone who began his career as a speechwriter. Both Ron and Bruce had done stints as my chief of staff when I was vice president. I'd chosen Ron as my White House chief of staff, and Bruce as deputy chief of staff.

We were in my library, working on the speech with the TV on in the background, when Jill came in to call our attention to it. We couldn't believe what we were seeing. Throughout my campaign, I had described the election as a battle for the soul of the nation, and now a literal battle was unfolding at the US Capitol. At first, Bruce, Ron, and I discussed adding a "topper" to the speech — a brief statement on what was happening, before returning to the economic remarks.

As the situation deteriorated, it was clear that something dangerous and extreme was happening. A violent mob had broken through security, overwhelming the Capitol Police, and was now streaming into the Capitol. They were breaking down doors. Shattering windows. Assaulting police officers. In the surging crowd, mixed in among those dressed in street clothes and winter jackets and hoodies, you could see people in face coverings dressed in paramilitary gear.



9780316598484_PromiseMeAmerica_int_1P.indd 2 7/17/26 1:51 PM

The rioters were carrying Trump flags. They were using US flags as battering rams. A Confederate flag was now flying inside the Capitol, something that had not happened even during the Civil War.

This would require more than a "topper."

I convened my senior staff on the phone — this would be the group that would respond to crises in the White House, and now we had a crisis to respond to weeks before my inauguration. Throughout my campaign, I had often felt as if I had to simultaneously run for president and *be* the president — to model responsible behavior, to speak of hope, to stay optimistic, to share empathy, to hold a nation together. So it was not much of a departure for me to tell my team that the American people needed to hear from their incoming president in a way that they had never heard from their outgoing one. I asked Bruce to get in touch with Mike Donilon. Mike had worked with me going back to the 1980s. He had worn several hats over the years: pollster, speechwriter, strategist. What it all boiled down to was that he was the man who knew how I thought and how I liked to speak, perhaps better than anyone.

I prepared to head to the Queen, a nineteenth-century Wilmington building that had originally been named the Indian Queen Hotel and was now a theater and concert venue. My team had rented it and set it up for videos and press events and announcements during the transition period. We expected most of those events to be announcements about key staff. This would be different. Just before 2 p.m., I asked Bruce to join me in the car, along with Annie Tomasini, who would become my head of Oval Office operations, and Stephen Goepfert, my personal aide.

Meanwhile, the situation at the Capitol continued to deteriorate.

Inside the Capitol, the mob was roaming the halls, trying to hunt down members of Congress and halt the certification.

A self-proclaimed shaman, face painted and wearing a head of horns, sat behind the desk where the vice president had presided. Members of Congress were taking cover under seats. Others were barricading themselves inside offices. Others fled.

On the lawn, gallows had been erected to hang Vice President Mike Pence. Smoke was enveloping the Capitol. We were seeing scenes of chaos like those we had seen only on TV from war-torn countries. But this was no television image from a faraway land. This was happening in America. In our nation's capital. In the sacred seat of our government.

Where was the president?

Just hours before, he had spoken to this crowd on the Ellipse behind the White House. For weeks, ever since the election results had been declared, he had been calling on his supporters to come to Washington. He had promised them in a tweet: "Be there, will be wild." Now we knew what he'd meant. After working the crowd to a fever pitch, President Trump had told them to go to the Capitol. He'd said he would be right there alongside them. He'd told them, "If you don't fight like hell, you're not going to have a country anymore." But Donald Trump hadn't gone with the mob. Instead he'd retreated to his private dining room off the Oval Office to watch them on television.

For the next three hours, he watched the riot he had set in motion. One hundred forty-six police officers would be assaulted that day. Democratic and Republican leaders, White House staff, and his own family members would all plead with him to act. And yet he did nothing. For three hours the nation waited to hear from our president. But all we got was silence. America's president wasn't leading America, he was leading an insurrection. It was among the worst derelictions of duty by any president in our history.

If the president wouldn't address the nation, the president-elect would.

---

The certification of my election, beginning at noon that day in the Capitol, was intended to be a formality, the official count of electoral votes from a presidential election in which both a greater number and



9780316598484_PromiseMeAmerica_int_1P.indd 4 7/17/26 1:51 PM

a higher percentage of Americans had voted than ever before. The count would certify my decisive victory, a victory won in no small part because of how much work there was to be done to get America back on its feet.

The country was reeling from the COVID-19 pandemic. In just two weeks, I would inherit a nation with unacceptably high unemployment. Businesses shuttered all over the country. Schools closed. Fewer than four million people vaccinated. Mobile refrigeration morgues stationed outside hospitals. We were living through a modern-day plague. For months, fear had gripped the country.

And now the country faced an existential crisis. The very cornerstone of our democracy was under attack. For the first time in our history, the peaceful transfer of power was under assault.

I got out of the motorcade at the Queen, where I was met by Ashley Williams, my campaign trip director, and Adam Schultz, who would become my chief White House photographer.

Rather than head directly onto the stage, I went into a small, windowless office behind it, where we again watched the scene at the Capitol on a small TV set, confirming my sense that the strong words I had prepared weren't equal to the horror now unfolding. Bruce and I called Mike Donilon and Ron as well as Jon Meacham, a Pulitzer Prize–winning historian whom I often turned to for help situating my remarks in the sweep and context of America's journey.

I asked Jon if we had ever seen anything like this before. Jon shared my shock, in particular, at seeing Confederate flags carried into the Capitol, a sight that brought to mind Abraham Lincoln's words from his 1862 message to Congress: "We shall nobly save or meanly lose the last best hope of earth."

After we made our edits, I asked Mike and Bruce to clean it up and Stephen to get it loaded into the teleprompter.

As I stood up to make a couple of phone calls, I noticed that the Secret Service agents were even more on edge than normal. These men and women are professionals, willing to put themselves in harm's way



9780316598484_PromiseMeAmerica_int_1P.indd 5 7/17/26 1:51 PM

in my service and the service of my family, and I'm grateful for it every day. Over the years, I'd come to recognize that at times of heightened risk and threat, they stood a little closer to a closed door, moved a little faster to intercept someone walking toward me. This was one of those times.

My vice president–elect, Kamala Harris, had started her day at the US Capitol for a classified briefing with the Senate Intelligence Committee, but had then gone to the headquarters of the Democratic National Committee to videotape some postelection messages. Since she had become a Secret Service protectee when she became the vice presidential nominee, I felt good knowing she was safe. Even so, I called her to check in and make sure she was okay. Only later would we learn that she was not as safe as we had thought; someone had planted pipe bombs near both the DNC and Republican National Committee headquarters. Thankfully, they were not detonated.

My next call was to Cedric Richmond, a member of Congress from Louisiana who had agreed to join my administration as the head of my Office of Public Engagement. Cedric and I had met when I was serving as vice president, at one of the dinners I hosted for the Democratic members of Congress who had been elected in his class, in 2010. That election was, in President Obama's memorable description, a "shellacking." As a result, there were only nine new House Democrats, and I got to know them well.

Cedric was the only Democrat in Louisiana's congressional delegation. He had become chair of the Congressional Black Caucus in 2017. In the lead-up to the 2018 elections, he had encouraged me to come campaign in several key districts where he'd felt I could turn out people who didn't vote regularly; our efforts had been resoundingly successful. He had encouraged me to run for president and had been with me ever since, becoming one of my campaign cochairs. He had just won his own election, and I was grateful he was willing to give up his safe seat in the Congress to come work with me. Of course, now "safe" had taken on a different meaning, and I wanted to know what

Cedric was seeing inside the Capitol. The short answer from Cedric was chaos. He had been camped out in the Lincoln Room, which housed the office of the majority whip, Jim Clyburn. From there, he could look out over Statuary Hall and see the insurrectionists moving through the Capitol. The members had barricaded themselves in the office as rioters pounded on the doors. The Capitol Police had then moved Cedric and several other members from both parties to a hearing room in the Rayburn Building where they were safe from immediate danger. He did note to me that the most immediate risk for him at that point, with COVID still raging, was that the Republicans they were sheltering with refused to wear masks.

I then called Speaker Nancy Pelosi. We had known each other long enough that I often called her Nance. We met shortly after I was elected to the Senate, when she was a party organizer in Northern California. We loved talking politics. Baltimore, Maryland, where she grew up, was a lot like Wilmington, and many of our experiences rhymed. In fact, her family had a home they vacationed at in Rehoboth Beach, in Delaware, near my home there. So when she was considering a run for office, I invited her to a party one night to meet some of my donors — as she had done for me. I told everyone I was bringing a rising star. When I introduced her, it was dark out, and the party was a little noisy, and only later did I realize that several guests had thought they met the golfer Nancy *Lopez*. Over the years, we worked together, we attended the Mass installing Pope Francis together, and now, here we were — she as a history-making speaker and I as president-elect, trying to navigate through a constitutional crisis.

Nancy assured me that my election would be certified that day. And it was clear to me that despite our friendship, her commitment wasn't to me, it was to the Constitution. She had so much swirling around her; trying to get the governors of Virginia and Maryland to call out the National Guard, trying to make sure Vice President Pence wasn't spirited away[1], and not even knowing at that point that her office was being ransacked. Still, with a steely voice, she told me



9780316598484_PromiseMeAmerica_int_1P.indd 7 7/17/26 1:51 PM

that she would not be deterred from her constitutional requirement. It was a tone of voice I had heard — and would hear again — many times, and it doesn't leave any room for doubt.

Between the calls, I took out my rosary ring.

Because I would be giving a different speech from the one I'd been planning that morning, my team quietly changed the backdrop that would appear behind me from one that had an economic message to one that simply read: "Office of the President Elect."

Just after 4 p.m., I walked to the stage, removed my mask, and apologized for keeping the press waiting past the time I'd said I would appear.

> At this hour, our democracy is under unprecedented assault — unlike anything we've seen in modern times.

I called it by its name:

> This is not dissent. It's disorder, it's chaos, it borders on sedition. And it must end now. I call on this mob to pull back and allow the work of democracy to go forward.

Then I spoke to President Trump directly:

> At their best, the words of a president can inspire. At their worst, they can incite. Therefore, I call on President Trump to go on national television now, to fulfill his oath and defend the Constitution and demand an end to this siege.

I continued my remarks by making it perfectly clear: The ugly scenes that were tearing our country apart were not "protest" at all — this was an insurrection.

*Insurrection*. When I said the word that day, no one disagreed with me. A violent insurrection was underway. The lies that the



9780316508484_PromiseMeAmerica_int_1P.indd 8 7/17/26 1:51 PM

insurrectionists were patriots and this was just a peaceful protest that got out of hand would come later.

Then I spoke to what was now clear:

> The work of the moment and the work of the next four years must be the restoration of democracy.

The most urgent work of that day became the most urgent work of my presidency. To protect, to defend, to preserve our democracy. I would learn, as would the nation, that work is never done. The threat to democracy is never over.

As I left the Queen to return home, I looked out the window at the familiar streets and buildings of Wilmington. I saw the faces of my friends, my neighbors, my fellow Americans. And I thought, "My God, for months they've been living with a mystery virus that has taken their jobs, upended their lives, and taken their loved ones. Now they're seeing this? Now they have to wonder if their democracy is going to be taken from them too?"

I vowed it wouldn't happen. This virus would be beat. Their jobs would be saved. Their democracy would be secured.

I had a job to do.

Since the Twentieth Amendment to the Constitution took effect in October 1933, presidents have begun their presidencies on January 20. Mine began on January 6.

---

Two weeks later, I was in Washington, DC, standing on the West Front of the Capitol, about to be inaugurated as the forty-sixth president of the United States.

COVID had affected so many celebratory moments for millions of Americans, and this day would be no different for us. Instead of looking out at a crowd of hundreds of thousands of people, I saw

instead a sea of American flags, nearly two hundred thousand flags representing the American people who couldn't be there, as well as the flags of all fifty states, the District of Columbia, and the five major US territories. The people who were there on the inaugural platform were all tested and masked.

At eleven minutes before noon on January 20, 2021, I placed my left hand on the old Biden family Bible, raised my right hand, and prepared to take the oath of office.

History was happening all around us. My running mate, Kamala Harris, was the first to be sworn in, by Supreme Court Justice Sonia Sotomayor. Kamala was breaking new ground. She was the first African American, the first Asian American, and the first woman to serve as vice president. When she completed her oath of office, we shared a double fist bump.

Next, Chief Justice John Roberts spoke the words of the oath, as prescribed by Article II of the Constitution: "I do solemnly swear that I will faithfully execute the Office of President of the United States, and will to the best of my ability, preserve, protect and defend the Constitution of the United States."

I repeated them, carefully. Then Chief Justice Roberts said, "So help you God," alluding to the four words that George Washington is said to have blurted out spontaneously at the first inauguration, in 1789: "So help me God."

Those words are nowhere in the Constitution, as Chief Justice Roberts surely knew. But many presidents have spoken them since, honoring tradition as well as the strict language of the oath. It wasn't hard for me to say. I knew I would need help from every quarter.

There is a photograph of this moment that I will always hold close to my heart. Jill, Hunter, Ashley, and I embraced, holding the family Bible that had been part of so many previous swearing-in ceremonies over the years. But a piece of our soul was missing.

Our journey to DC had started the day before. Unlike when I was elected vice president, taking the Amtrak train was not an option. It was just as well that we would fly, because it allowed me to take off from the Delaware Air National Guard base, whose headquarters had been renamed in honor of my late son Beau, and thank the men and women stationed there for their service. When we arrived in DC, we headed to Blair House, directly across the street from the White House. I rehearsed my inaugural address. Chief Justice Roberts came by to walk me through the administration of the oath of office. I showed him the family Bible I'd be using, which had briefly gone missing in the several moves I had made since leaving the vice presidency. Once it was just family, we had dinner, which, even on the eve of such a momentous day, felt surprisingly "normal" — there was pasta and red sauce, and the grandkids were all laughing and talking over one another. Then we tried to get some sleep.

Inauguration day started early with a service at the Cathedral of St. Matthew the Apostle. Most incoming presidents begin with a service at St. John's, an old Episcopal church in Lafayette Square, across the street from the White House. But I wanted to honor my own faith tradition, and St. Matthew's is the mother church of the Roman Catholic Archdiocese of Washington. It's an imposing structure, almost Byzantine in its design, with a prominent dome, and ornate mosaics throughout.

Known informally as the parish of public servants, St. Matthew's was where President Kennedy's funeral Mass was held in one of the darkest hours of our history, in November 1963. To return to St. Matthew's felt like a way to pay respect to the thirty-fifth president, whose inaugural speech had thrilled me when I watched it on a blustery day in January 1961.

It also felt like a personal homecoming. I would often visit to attend Mass or offer a personal prayer during my time as vice president. Now I was back, seeking spiritual sustenance before taking on the great responsibility of the presidency. Jill was by my side, as were



9780316598484_PromiseMeAmerica_int_1P.indd 11 7/17/26 1:51 PM

Kamala Harris and her husband, Doug Emhoff. I was also gratified to see Democratic and Republican leaders there: Nancy Pelosi and Chuck Schumer, Kevin McCarthy and Mitch McConnell.

The service was led by Father Kevin O'Brien, whose words struck me deeply: "Every day, you will strive to heal our nation's wounds and reconcile differences and bring us together. You know too well the challenges ahead and the cost of service." Indeed I did, and both the challenges and the costs would mount.

---

Just getting through the Capitol, it was hard not to feel shock at all the signs of destruction, everywhere around us, as we made our way toward the West Front, where the inauguration would be held. There were broken windows, still unrepaired, and scuff marks on the floors and walls, signs of the struggle that had pitted the brave defenders of our democracy, the Capitol Police, against the violent mob. Days earlier, I had spoken to the family of Brian Sicknick, a Capitol Police officer who collapsed while defending the Capitol and died a day later.

The Capitol was not only the house of the people, it was a secular sanctuary for me. When my wife and daughter died shortly after I was elected to the Senate in 1972, I had decided I wouldn't take the oath of office. I had two young sons in the hospital. Delaware could get another senator; my boys couldn't get another dad.

However, giants of the Senate like Ted Kennedy, Hubert Humphrey, and Mike Mansfield convinced me to serve, or at least try it for a while. I agreed that I would give it six months, but as a single parent, I would need to be home every night, to put the boys to bed, to be there if they had a bad dream. So I was sworn in, in the hospital, at Beau and Hunter's bedside, and began a tradition of traveling to and from Washington, nearly four hours a day. Amtrak Joe.

Even with Senate leaders occasionally rescheduling votes to accommodate me, I couldn't have done it without my sister, Val, my



9780316598484_PromiseMeAmerica_int_1P.indd 12 7/17/26 1:51 PM

brothers, Jimmy and Frank, and my parents. And five years later, Jill. At the time, and at other times of tragedy, people have said to me, "The Lord never gives someone more than they can handle." I always found that sentiment, while well-intentioned, completely false. God gives people more than they can handle all the time. They turn to drink, or drugs, or suicide. People break. My family kept me from breaking. As did my work.

I found healing and purpose in that Capitol Building. It was where, at a time when domestic violence was often a dark secret, I wrote the Violence Against Women Act — which would need to be reauthorized during my presidency. It was where I wrote the crime bill that led to a historic drop in crime across our country. It was where I rallied my colleagues to stand strong against a genocide in the Balkans in the 1990s. It was a place where I had made memories and, in my view, significant accomplishments.

When I left the Senate to become vice president to Barack Obama, the Senate historian told me that I had served in the Senate longer than all but 19 senators in US history, and that of the 1,900 US senators who had ever served, I had served with more than 320 of them.

So it hurt on a personal level to see this place that represented both the majesty of democracy and my own history so desecrated.

Stopping by a broken pane of glass, I instinctively put my hand on it. Jill put her hand over mine. It was a fitting image for the day. A nation bruised and broken and battered. But still standing.

I would speak to the resilience of our people, our nation, our democracy in my inaugural address.

The inaugural theme was "Our Determined Democracy: Forging a More Perfect Union." Remarkably, it had been chosen by a bipartisan joint committee, even before the election and January 6. But that word "determined" sounded just right; I wanted to say something in that spirit.

Tradition demands, rightfully so, a courtesy between the president-elect and the departing president. I have personally witnessed this



9780316598484_PromiseMeAmerica_int_1P.indd 13 7/17/26 1:51 PM

courtesy on many occasions, and each time, it fills my heart with pride and joy. In Delaware, we even have an old custom that is still practiced called Return Day. The Thursday after an election, both parties gather in the town square in the town of Georgetown. The town crier reads the election results from the courthouse balcony, the party leaders literally bury a hatchet, and then the winner and loser of each race parade around the town square in a horse-drawn buggy. These small civilities are the essence of democracy. I saw George H. W. Bush handle his 1992 defeat to Bill Clinton with inexpressible grace; a proud man, humbled by his defeat, but so deeply patriotic that he did everything he could to aid the transition. I saw Bill Clinton, and Al Gore, return the favor by doing everything that they could to make George W. Bush feel welcome in 2001. Al Gore's concession speech from the bitterly contested election of 2000 remains a high-water mark when I think about the individual acts of selflessness that allow our democracy to succeed.

But in 2020, we were dealing with a new reality. One that would have a profound effect on the nation, and on my presidency.

Even after losing more than sixty court challenges to the election, even after the Supreme Court ruled against him, even after the failure of the January 6 insurrection, Donald Trump refused to concede he lost. His refusal to abide by that one simple gesture that every losing candidate in American history has followed would ensure that, for tens of millions of his supporters, the election never ended. It was just one of the ways Donald Trump would unceasingly drive wedges in the country over the next four years.

We take for granted our civic norms, the smallest gestures, the functioning of our institutions in this country. We shouldn't. They're critical components of our civility and our democracy.

Even after the failure of the January 6 insurrection, Donald Trump kept driving wedges between the American people. On January 7, he finally acknowledged that "a new administration" was coming in, without mentioning my name. But his social media posts and



9780316598484_PromiseMeAmerica_int_1P.indd 14 7/17/26 1:51 PM

public statements were combative. On January 8, the volcano was snuffed, for a spell, after Twitter announced that he was banned from its platform "due to the risk of further incitement of violence."[2] But he continued to radiate a kind of monarchical disbelief that he had been fired by the American people.

That tension continued right up to January 20. Every inauguration presents a surreal split screen, as television viewers are treated to simultaneous coverage of the outgoing president leaving the scene and the new president coming in.

On January 8, Donald Trump had declared that he wouldn't attend my inauguration. You had to go a long way back in the history books — to 1869 — to find an outgoing president who had skipped out on the ceremony. Unsurprisingly, it was Andrew Johnson, invariably described as one of our worst presidents, who regarded Washington with paranoia and distrust and heaped some of that frustration on his successor, Ulysses S. Grant, whose inauguration he refused to attend. Grant didn't particularly mind Johnson's absence, and I felt more or less the same way. But I think it was costly to the country. One more norm, one more tradition, one more act of civility had fallen away.

My predecessor headed out the door having been defeated handily.

Despite that, I would be taking over one of the most closely divided Congresses in American history. The Democrats held just a seven-seat margin in the House. The Senate was split fifty-fifty, with the Democrats gaining the majority by virtue of my vice president presiding over the body. The narrow margins would make legislating difficult, but I wouldn't let that challenge shrink my vision for the country. It would take all forty-four years of experience I had had in public office — thirty-six years in the US Senate and another eight years as vice president — to pass what many historians would call the most ambitious legislative agenda since Lyndon Johnson.

A second impeachment trial was about to begin in Congress, which was going to make my job harder. There is no question that



9780316598484_PromiseMeAmerica_int_1P.indd 15 7/17/26 1:51 PM

impeachment was warranted, after Donald Trump's efforts to lead an insurrection, obstruct an official proceeding of Congress, and overturn a legitimate election. But impeachments have become increasingly partisan affairs. And they call for a lot of courage, especially from members of the party of the president being tried. That courage would be found lacking in the Republican Party, with many hiding behind the argument that Trump would be held accountable by the court system at a later date. That day never came.

As angry as I was about January 6, I was troubled by the prospect of another impeachment. I was eager to begin my presidency with a raft of new legislation to get the country on its feet again, and for us all to move forward. As Lincoln wrote, in some of the darkest days of the Civil War, "We must think anew, and act anew. We must disenthrall ourselves, and then we shall save our country."[3]

But it's one thing to contemplate the history books; it's another to handle the crisis you are living through, in real time. How could I bring Americans back together, into a stronger union, while helping them to conquer their fears and avert another financial meltdown?

In the end, I just decided to speak plainly and honestly to the country about what we had been through and, more importantly, where we needed to go.

As I approached the lectern, it wasn't hard to see how unusual this inauguration was. The Capitol was ringed by armed National Guard troops. At that very moment there was a full team in the Situation Room in the White House, monitoring the Capitol and the city for any potential threats. The nation was on high alert.

Three former presidents were in attendance: Bill Clinton, George W. Bush, and Barack Obama, but not my predecessor. The leaders of all three branches of government were onstage. There was a vast national and international audience watching. I was also thinking hard about the people who were not there — my parents, and especially my son Beau, who had died after a battle with brain cancer on May 30, 2015.



9780316598484_PromiseMeAmerica_int_1P.indd 16 7/17/26 1:51 PM

Most kids grow up hoping their father will be proud of them. I was a father who hoped my son would be proud of me. And as I stood there about to speak, that's what I said to myself: "Beau, I hope I'll make you proud." Every day without Beau was hard. But sometimes the good days were even tougher than the hard ones. This one especially. I couldn't help but think Beau should be standing where I was. Beau, who had served our nation in uniform and served Delaware as attorney general; handsome, articulate Beau should be taking the oath of office, not me.

I paused to reset myself before I approached the microphone. Before I said a word, I wanted to take in the view.

At the end of the National Mall, I could see the familiar outlines of the Lincoln Memorial, facing the Capitol and, in a sense, speaking truth to power, as its planners had intended. My early decision to go into public service had been propelled by the killing of Martin Luther King Jr. in 1968 — only five years after his iconic "I Have a Dream" speech at the Lincoln Memorial. I hoped I could do my part to advance his vision.

When white supremacists and neo-Nazis paraded with torches at Charlottesville in 2017 and President Trump refused to condemn them, I was so outraged that I wrote an essay for *The Atlantic* magazine, "We Are Living Through a Battle for the Soul of This Nation." In many ways, that essay was the first step in my return to politics, and my decision to seek the presidency.

I began by thanking my predecessors of both parties, and mentioning a former president, Jimmy Carter, with whom I had spoken the night before. I wanted my inauguration to be a unifying moment, and I promised to be a president for *all* Americans. In my first act as president, I asked for a moment of silence to honor our dead. Astonishingly, nearly four hundred thousand Americans had died of COVID in a little less than a year.

I wanted to be clear: This wasn't a day about me. It was about America. It was about our democracy:



9780316598484_PromiseMeAmerica_int_1P.indd 17 7/17/26 1:51 PM

This is America's day.

This is democracy's day.

A day of history and hope.

Of renewal and resolve.

Through a crucible for the ages, America has been tested anew, and America has risen to the challenge.

Today, we celebrate the triumph, not of a candidate but of a cause, the cause of democracy.

The will of the people has been heard, and the will of the people has been heeded.

I then spoke to how I was standing on the very spot where just two weeks before, the mob had sought to derail this inauguration:

We have learned again that democracy is precious.

Democracy is fragile.

And at this hour, my friends, democracy has prevailed.

So now, on this hallowed ground where just days ago violence sought to shake this Capitol's very foundation, we come together as one nation, under God, indivisible, to carry out the peaceful transfer of power as we have for more than two centuries.

"Democracy has prevailed." This described what we had overcome. It didn't mean the battle was over.

I then laid out the challenges the nation was facing:

A once-in-a-century virus silently stalks the country.

It's taken as many lives in one year as America lost in all of World War II.

Millions of jobs have been lost.

Hundreds of thousands of businesses closed.



9780316598484_PromiseMeAmerica_int_1P.indd 18 7/17/26 1:51 PM

A cry for racial justice some four hundred years in the making moves us. The dream of justice for all will be deferred no longer.

A cry for survival comes from the planet itself. A cry that can't be any more desperate or any more clear.

And now, a rise in political extremism, white supremacy, domestic terrorism that we must confront and we will defeat.

There were some who cautioned me against using the words "white supremacy." No president had ever said those words in their inaugural address. But it was watching white supremacists spew their hate in Charlottesville that had brought me into the race for president in the first place. I wasn't about to trim my sails. I was going to do as president what I had done as US senator and vice president: Give it to them straight.

I wasn't the first to invoke Saint Augustine. My fellow Catholic John Kennedy had done so in 1961. But I was the first to invoke him by name. To me, it was a way to speak to those things that bind us together as Americans:

Many centuries ago, Saint Augustine, a saint of my church, wrote that a people was a multitude defined by the common objects of their love.

What are the common objects we love that define us as Americans?

I think we know.

Opportunity.

Security.

Liberty.

Dignity.

Respect.



9780316598484_PromiseMeAmerica_int_1P.indd 19 7/17/26 1:51 PM

Honor.

And, yes, the truth.

The next section was the last I had added to the speech, that very morning. Because I felt it was urgent. We're at risk of our politics being completely untethered to the truth in America. More than at any point in my more than fifty years of public life, lies are shamelessly told by people in power these days. It's not only corrosive. It's fundamentally damaging to our democracy. If we can't even agree on basic facts, on simple truths, we'll never be able to find the common ground needed for rational discussion and debate:

> Recent weeks and months have taught us a painful lesson.
>
> There is truth and there are lies.
>
> Lies told for power and for profit.
>
> And each of us has a duty and responsibility, as citizens, as Americans, and especially as leaders — leaders who have pledged to honor our Constitution and protect our nation — to defend the truth and to defeat the lies.

I also believed, with all my heart, that we could handle these crises if we acted as a united people. "With unity we can do great things," I promised, and I knew it was true.

Near the end, I cited a favorite piece of scripture, from Psalm 30: "Weeping may endure for a night, but joy cometh in the morning." I promised that I would give it my all. And I asked all Americans to join me in the great cause of restoring decency and dignity in our battered nation. We needed to heal our land and people, and we needed to get America back to work.

With my speech completed, the ceremony was nearly over, but a few special moments remained. Lady Gaga had opened the event with a stirring performance of the national anthem, Jennifer Lopez performed "This Land Is Your Land" and "America the Beautiful,"



9780316598484_PromiseMeAmerica_int_1P.indd 20 7/17/26 1:51 PM

bridging the two by reciting part of our Pledge of Allegiance in Spanish, and now Garth Brooks stepped forward to deliver a haunting rendition of "Amazing Grace." That old spiritual, with its profound humility, was just right for the tone I was hoping to set.

If "Amazing Grace" had brought solemnity into the occasion, then we needed some joy to close it out. I don't think anyone could have delivered it as buoyantly as Amanda Gorman did. Even before she began to speak, we were all smiling. It may have been her brilliant plumage — a red headband and a bright yellow coat that captured the sunshine all around us. There was something electric about her exuberance, and her regal bearing was all the more impressive for the fact that she was all of twenty-two years old. I was grateful to Jill for finding this blazing young talent, and all the more moved when I learned that she, too, had overcome a speech impediment in childhood. As soon as she launched into her poem "The Hill We Climb," it was clear that it was the perfect message, delivered at the perfect moment. With an incantatory rhythm, she brought us along with her, through a lot of American history, including the recent January 6 attack. But she never lost her faith that she — and we — were going to get to our destination. One phrase especially stayed with me: "So let us leave behind a country better than the one we were left." That sounded pretty good. I guess that's what poets do, they get to the essence of things. She had managed to distill my entire inaugural address into a single line.

Normally, the conclusion of the inaugural ceremony leads to hours of celebration — a lunch in Statuary Hall, followed by a big parade down Pennsylvania Avenue and a series of inaugural balls in the evening. But 2021 was not a normal year. Jill and I didn't have the typical opportunities that day to convene the American people — especially our supporters, staff, and volunteers, to express our deepest gratitude for putting their faith, their time, their resources into supporting my candidacy.

Only an hour or so had elapsed since the beginning of the ceremony, but already I could tell how much had changed. I was still the



9780316598484_PromiseMeAmerica_int_1P.indd 21 7/17/26 1:51 PM

same old Joe Biden that everyone knew, but of course I had acquired a new job, and with it, a new title. Steny Hoyer, the majority leader in the House and an old friend, had called me "Joe" a thousand times, but now it was strictly "Mr. President." Jill was with us, and jokingly, she interjected, "He makes me call him that too." With mock seriousness, Steny warned us, "Marriage about to get rocky, I can tell," to huge laughter.

We left the Capitol for my first trip as president to Arlington National Cemetery, where we laid a wreath at the Tomb of the Unknown Soldier.

I could not help noticing that my ride had improved considerably. Although I love my 1967 Corvette, that was no longer an option. I was now being driven around Washington in an enormous, heavily armored limousine, affectionately nicknamed "the Beast." The license plate was "46" — a nice touch.

We headed back across the river, toward Pennsylvania Avenue and the White House. For the last few blocks, Jill and I got out of the car to walk, so we could create a modest parade feeling, even in the pandemic, even as we were still masked. As we were steps from turning onto the driveway leading to the North Portico, I saw a couple of familiar faces and naturally veered off course to say hello. I gave a fist bump to NBC's Al Roker, because who can resist Al Roker? The same went for Washington's mayor, Muriel Bowser. I exchanged a couple of words with Mike Memoli of NBC News, who had been covering me for well over a decade, and was one of the embedded reporters during my campaign for vice president. He asked me how it all felt. "Feels like I am coming home!" I replied.

The gates of the White House compound swung open, and we walked across the carefully manicured grounds until we reached the North Portico. It had been a long journey to this point, and we were at the threshold of yet another one. Jill and I shared a brief embrace. We heard the strains of "Hail to the Chief" being played by the United



9780316598484_PromiseMeAmerica_int_1P.indd 22 7/17/26 1:51 PM

States Marine Band, often called "The President's Own." Then the doors opened, and we were in our new home.

It was good to meet the men and women who take care of the White House and serve the first families loyally, regardless of political affiliation. They could not have been warmer in the way they welcomed us. Finally, I made my way to the Oval Office, which had already been redecorated to suit my tastes.

There was one element of the office I was somewhat surprised to find: a gracious note from my predecessor. In his trademark blocky script, in heavy Sharpie ink, he had addressed the envelope "To '46.'"

I opened it to find the following letter.

> Dear Joe,
>
> Coming to work every day in the Oval Office is a blessing beyond imagination. History resounds from every wall, every statue, every beautiful painting, and every corner of this magical place. Each staircase, hallway, and door leads to yet another door and memory, another inflection point in the glorious story of America.
>
> I hope you take a moment every single day to take stock of where you are and the people who came before you, the titans who shaped the course of human events. You now have the opportunity to choose your place in history, and I know you will be true to yourself and the American people.
>
> Many presidents have come and gone who simply governed as Republicans or Democrats. Largely, they did not change history, they were just swept along in its relentless tide. This will



9780316598484_PromiseMeAmerica_int_1P.indd 23 7/17/26 1:51 PM

NOT HAPPEN TO YOU, BECAUSE I KNOW HOW MUCH YOU LOVE THE AMERICAN PEOPLE.

NOT ONLY ARE YOU JOINED BY THE PAST, BUT YOU CARRY THE HOPES AND DREAMS OF THE ENTIRE NATION ON YOUR SHOULDERS. THE GRAVITY OF THE FACT NEVER LEAVES YOU, IT IS THE ANCHOR THAT GROUNDS EVERY DECISION THAT YOU MAKE.

YOUR STRENGTH, YOUR DEEPEST RESERVOIR OF ENERGY, COMES FROM THE KNOWLEDGE THAT MILLIONS UPON MILLIONS OF PEOPLE ARE DEPENDING ON YOU. THEIR AMBITIONS AND ASPIRATIONS ARE THE REASON YOU ARE HERE, WITH SO MANY COUNTING ON YOUR SUCCESS.

MAY GOD BLESS YOU AND JILL, AND MAY GOD BLESS AMERICA.

SINCERELY,
DONALD

It was almost as if there were two Donald Trumps. He had been attacking me for most of the previous two years, and done all he could to overturn my victory. In so doing, he had deeply destabilized our democracy. He had not offered the traditional meeting between presidents, in which I might have expected to hear his parting thoughts about what threats to anticipate, and other pieces of advice between two leaders with a uniquely shared perspective. That never happened. But here he was, offering his best wishes (and a somewhat incongruous paean to bipartisanship) in a warm language that sounded like it was coming from an old high school friend.

---

It had been a long day, but at five o'clock, it wasn't close to over yet. I wanted to hit the ground running, and to that end, my team and I



9780316598484_PromiseMeAmerica_int_1P.indd 24 7/17/26 1:51 PM

had prepared seventeen executive orders for signature. They included measures to ratchet up our response to COVID, stabilize the economy, rejoin the Paris Climate Accords, strengthen legal protections for Dreamers (the undocumented immigrants who had been brought to this country when they were very young, for many of whom America was the only home they had ever known), and require an ethics pledge from all executive branch officials.

My next stop, a little after 6 p.m., was the State Dining Room. There we had set up four large monitors and had roughly one thousand of my political appointees on the screen. Some were Zooming in from their offices at the White House complex. Others were making their way to Washington to start their jobs. I was going to swear them in, but before I did, I wanted to remind them what they were swearing to. I told them that I worked for the people, and so did they. "We have an obligation, but we also have a great privilege. Very few times does an individual get an opportunity to do something that can fundamentally positively impact other people's lives, not only here but around the world. You are engaged in, and you are working with, the most decent government in the world. We have to restore the soul of this country, and I'm counting on all of you to be part of that."

I then headed to the Lincoln Memorial. In lieu of the traditional inaugural balls and celebrations, we wanted to make the inauguration about the American people. My team had worked with the television networks to present a special broadcast that we called *Celebrating America*. I didn't kid myself, though; I wasn't the star of that show.

Tom Hanks opened the broadcast. Kerry Washington and Eva Longoria, who had helped emcee my convention, cohosted. John Legend, Demi Lovato, the Foo Fighters, and Justin Timberlake all performed. Bruce Springsteen sang "Land of Hope and Dreams"; the lyrics, "Leave behind your sorrows / Let this day be the last / Tomorrow there'll be sunshine / And all this darkness past," felt like an affirmation. As part of the broadcast, I gave short remarks from inside the Lincoln Memorial, asking for unity and pledging, "I will give my all



9780316598484_PromiseMeAmerica_int_1P.indd 25 7/17/26 1:51 PM

to you." I meant it. Then Jill and I returned to the White House and walked out to the Truman Balcony.

From there we watched the stunning concluding performance of the evening. Katy Perry stood on the National Mall, where she delivered a powerful rendition of her song "Firework," perfectly synchronized to a fireworks display over the reflecting pool, illuminating the Washington Monument.

There were so many acts of kindness from that first day that I cannot mention them all. But I know I will never forget one. Early on January 21, the morning after the inauguration, *The Washington Post* ran a story about a photographer from the Delaware *News Journal* who had gone to Beau's gravesite in Wilmington at the exact moment I was delivering my inaugural address. There she found a uniformed officer kneeling in tribute, and took a photograph. I didn't know the person in the photo, but sometimes the most moving gestures are the nameless ones. That fundamental decency is the mortar of our democracy.[4]



9780316598484_PromiseMeAmerica_int_1P.indd 26 7/17/26 1:51 PM

CHAPTER TWO

# A PROMISE KEPT

In the year after Charlottesville, I wrestled with the decision of whether to run for president. I had convened some of my closest advisers from my years as vice president and senator to start mapping out what the campaign would look like. *Promise Me, Dad*, my book about Beau, came out in 2017. That book brought the decision into sharp focus. I had written it to work through the intensity of my grief. But throughout my book tour, I found friendly crowds, lingering long after my talks and urging me to consider a reentry into politics. "Run, Joe, run," was a chant I heard at more than a few of those readings. Then, in the 2018 midterms, I was much in demand as a speaker and surrogate, especially lending a hand to frontline Democratic friends around the country.

Naturally, we talked about it as a family. Not just me and Jill and Hunter and Ashley and my siblings, who had been part of so many of these conversations over the years; now there was a new generation of grandchildren who were old enough to understand both the importance and the costs of public service. At the time, that cohort included



9780316598484_PromiseMeAmerica_int_1P.indd 27 7/17/26 1:51 PM

Hunter's children, Naomi, Finnegan, and Maisy, and Beau's children, Natalie and Hunter — named for his uncle.

We discussed the toll it would take on our lives. It might also mean physical threats in a country that was edging ever closer to violence. These apprehensions were real. At the same time, they knew that Beau had asked me, when he was struggling for his life, to be *open* to a presidential run. Not necessarily to run but to be open, to stay involved, to stay engaged, to be of service.

I had thought that Beau might become the first Biden to live in the White House; he had the gift and the drive. In fact, he had more of the gift than I did. But fate had intervened — tragically — to remove him from consideration. That left me with a hard decision. As I thought more and more about it, I realized which way it was going to go. To honor Beau was the only decision.

But honoring Beau was not the only factor. Nor was the battle for the soul of the nation, as I saw it, limited to issues of justice and tolerance. It was also about economic opportunity. Throughout my career, I have always advocated for the middle class because if the middle class does well, the country does well. As vice president, I led the Middle Class Task Force, and after leaving office, I remained laser focused on the rapidly rising economic inequality in the country. In May 2018, I keynoted the launch of the Brookings Institution's Future of the Middle Class Initiative. "A strong middle class breeds opportunity," I said. "If we have a weak middle class, we have a fractured country."

These thoughts became more focused when, on November 30, 2018, the forty-first president, George H. W. Bush, died. At the time, he was the oldest former president in history and a beloved national figure. Naturally, his funeral at the Washington National Cathedral drew a tremendous turnout from official Washington; all the living presidents and vice presidents attended, including Donald Trump.

In my opinion, the man we were honoring would have been appalled by the decline in America's reputation over the past two years. Even to his political adversaries, he cut a striking figure,



9780316598484_PromiseMeAmerica_int_1P.indd 28 7/17/26 1:51 PM

radiating decency, civility, and a desire to do the right thing. It was always "country before self," from his service in the Second World War to his presidency and the visionary way he had handled the end of the Cold War. In his public remarks and his private conversation, it was clear that this was a public servant who held deeply patriotic values. I thought we needed more of that spirit in Washington. Nobody asked me directly if I was running, but the question seemed to linger at the edge of every interaction I had.

Afterward, Jill and I went to lunch at BlackSalt, a neighborhood restaurant and fish market in the Palisades section of Washington, DC, that we'd frequented on date nights during my days as vice president. I didn't really need to look at the menu; at seafood restaurants, I always get the same thing: the hamburger. Before the waiter even took our order, Jill put the question to me, point-blank: Was I running? I had a one-word answer: Yes. Saying it openly felt good. I wanted to run. I was going to run.

## THE CAMPAIGN BEGINS

There were many reasons it felt right in 2020, unlike 2016. I had been so profoundly grief-stricken in the year after Beau's death that I wasn't up for the emotional, mental, and physical challenge of a campaign. Four years later, I had recovered my equilibrium.

That said, I recognized that this would be my third run for the presidency. In the race for the 1988 Democratic nomination, I was in my mid-forties and running to be a leader representing a new generation, a generation that would repudiate special interests and sublimate narrow agendas to the greater good. The campaign was not a success; it lasted all of about four months and came to an embarrassing and messy end, redeemed only by the fact that I had learned several valuable lessons, and my withdrawal allowed me to focus my energies on my job as chair of the Senate Judiciary Committee and the Supreme Court confirmation hearings for the controversial judge Robert Bork,



9780316598484_PromiseMeAmerica_int_1P.indd 29 7/17/26 1:51 PM

whose judicial philosophy, I felt, would reverse decades of social progress.

In 2008 I ran again. And once again, I struggled to break through to voters, but this time, I felt absolutely prepared to do the job, and that confidence was liberating. Instead of being a candidate of youth, I was a candidate of experience. And though I didn't secure the nomination, I made an impression on Senator Obama, who chose me as his running mate.

The Greek philosopher Heraclitus is said to have written that a man cannot step into the same river twice because it is not the same river and he is not the same man. Now, after eight years as vice president, and two years to reflect, I was ready to run again, not as the candidate of youth or experience but as the candidate of wisdom. I was the person who knew better than anyone what the country needed, what the job required, and how to do it.

Also, to run openly against Donald Trump felt better than to vent criticisms in private. We have a proud tradition in this country, mostly honored by previous officeholders (with one prominent exception): Presidents and vice presidents do not speak ill of one another. But to step out into the daylight of a competitive race, that was a different matter. In that kind of open contest, I could speak my mind freely.

Indeed, that was what I did in my announcement video, released on April 25, 2019. I didn't talk about myself or my experience or accomplishments. I said that in the aftermath of Charlottesville, the president of the United States had assigned a moral equivalence between those spreading hate and those with the courage to stand against it. That was the moment I had known that the threat to this nation was unlike any I had ever seen in my lifetime.

I expressed my belief that history would look back on four years of Trump's presidency as an aberrant moment in time. I warned that if we were to give Donald Trump eight years in the White House, he would forever and fundamentally alter the character of this nation. I was running for president to prevent that from happening.



9780316598484_PromiseMeAmerica_int_1P.indd 30 7/17/26 1:51 PM

A couple of days later, I held the first rally of my presidential campaign at a Teamsters' hall in Pittsburgh's Lawrenceville neighborhood. I told the heavily union crowd that I was running for three reasons: To restore the soul of this nation. To rebuild the backbone of this nation. And to unify this nation. I made clear that I saw them, the union movement, and the middle class they had helped build as America's backbone. I called out local union busters and plant closures as evidence of a broken social compact between employers and workers. The response was enthusiastic. These were my people, and they finally had someone speaking for them.

On May 18, I held another rally before a large and friendly audience near the Philadelphia Museum of Art, with Philadelphia City Hall behind me and the stairs to the museum and the iconic statue of Rocky Balboa in front of me. Most importantly, I had Jill beside me, resplendent in a yellow dress and a blazer with the word "love" sparkling on the back; her Philadelphia accent just a little more noticeable when she introduced me.

I wanted to speak in the city where our founding charters had been written; it felt like the right place to reclaim the "soul of America."

I was determined to run an uplifting campaign, around the great ideas that America has always stood for. I said I was tired of the mean-spiritedness of our politics, and I thought that voters were as well. As I put it, "America guarantees everyone be treated with dignity…America gives hate no safe harbor. That's what we believe."[1] I'm a great admirer of the word "we," found in both the Declaration of Independence ("We hold these truths to be self-evident") and the Constitution ("We the people").

I expected to run on the issues I have always cared about: uniting America, building up the middle class, creating good jobs and benefits, rewarding hard work and enterprise, and maintaining America's standing in the world as a great force for democracy. I had said as much in my essay about Charlottesville in *The Atlantic*; indeed I had been saying as much for years. I saw no reason to deviate from



9780316598484_PromiseMeAmerica_int_1P.indd 31 7/17/26 1:51 PM

that commitment. Either the voters would meet me there, or they wouldn't.

I also wanted to get back to the truth, after four years in which it had been stretched to the breaking point. *The Washington Post* calculated that Donald Trump had uttered 30,753 false or misleading claims in his first term, or about twenty-one a day.[2]

One of the reasons I first ran for the Senate in 1972 was that I was angered by a growing pattern of lies coming out of Washington. Richard Nixon, then president, was creating one smoke screen after another to cover up the Watergate scandal. But there were clouds around both parties; the Pentagon Papers, released over Nixon's strenuous objections, revealed the extent to which both Democratic and Republican administrations had failed to tell the whole truth about the Vietnam War. A large reason for my stunning win, as a twenty-nine-year old, was that people of my generation were fed up with government falsehoods and denials of what were obviously official policies (such as Nixon's secret bombing of Cambodia).[3]

In the decades that followed, disinformation became an unfortunate fact of life, as personal computers and smartphones accelerated the ability to communicate — both accurately and inaccurately. In a world where people check their phones, on average, over 200 times a day, that's a problem. Some countries, like Russia, have taken to disinformation as an official state policy, to capture ground lost to the West. For example, in 2019, Russia was falling behind on the new technology of 5G phones and began to spread rumors online that 5G phones cause cancer.[4]

But the spread of disinformation is pervasive and goes well beyond Russia. Social media platforms, by and large, don't care much for nuance, and it's the stuff that stirs up emotions and resentments that goes viral.[5] It's not just that plenty of people are quite willing to vent their anger; it's that platforms and algorithms are wired to promote name-calling over reasonable debate.



9780316598484_PromiseMeAmerica_int_1P.indd 32 7/17/26 1:51 PM

There were more than twenty Democrats jockeying for the nomination, as might be expected after such a divisive and disappointing Republican administration. The enormous field included Senators Bernie Sanders, Amy Klobuchar, Kamala Harris, and Elizabeth Warren; South Bend, Indiana, Mayor Pete Buttigieg; and former New York City Mayor Michael Bloomberg.

I refused to tell everyone everything they wanted to hear. I was focused on how to govern, how to get the most accomplished, and how to beat Donald Trump. Everybody took their shots at me. The press, certainly. And in a debate in Miami, even my eventual vice president.

But I was encouraged by my high favorability ratings and the fact that I always polled strongly when it came to the vital question of who the American people believed had the best chance to defeat President Trump. He seemed to believe it too; in September 2019 it was revealed that he was putting extraordinary pressure on Ukraine's new president, Volodymyr Zelensky, to investigate me and my son Hunter for imagined offenses and threatening to cut off nearly $400 million in US military aid if Zelensky refused. This unprecedented form of presidential extortion was highly illegal, and after details of Trump's threats leaked out, Congress impeached him for the first time.

---

Heading into 2020, I was putting together a great team, with friends and veterans of my earlier campaigns, and lots of young, fresh faces too. I named Steve Ricchetti as my campaign chair and Greg Schultz as my campaign manager.

Since 2012, when he joined my vice presidential staff as a counselor, Steve had played a central role in my political life. Steve also was one of the three people to have served as my chief of staff when I was



9780316598484_PromiseMeAmerica_int_1P.indd 33 7/17/26 1:51 PM

vice president (the other two being Ron Klain and Bruce Reed). Steve was a bit of a politician himself going back to when he was the student body president of Miami University in Ohio. He had managed campaigns. He had served as President Clinton's deputy chief of staff and helped shepherd important legislation as well as key national security matters. He had the respect of leaders on both sides of the aisle, in part because of his infectious energy and ability to shrug off setbacks. Steve also helped build and manage my political operations over the years, quietly assembling the infrastructure necessary had I chosen to run for president in 2016, which I didn't, and for this campaign, which was now underway. Steve never wavered, never backed down in his belief that we could win.

I had been around the block a few times, and I knew that a campaign could be bumpy. But we were fighting for something bigger than a personal victory; we were standing up for democracy itself.

It was a message that always resonated when I gave stump speeches or met people up close, in all the ways that primaries make possible. But I had a nagging feeling that the media and the professional political consultants were not enthusiastic about me. It could have been the appeal of a new crop of candidates — a kind of fresh flavor of the month — or the fact that they had known me a long time, as both a senator and a vice president. Mike Donilon, with his decades of experience working on messaging, was reassuring. He felt that I was saying the right things, the things that were true to me and resonated broadly. He was confident that my consistency — my unwillingness to chase trends or seek out cultural battles to fight — would work to my advantage. If I worked hard, campaigned hard, and was clear about the America I wanted to build, voters would find me, and I would find them.

And I did. In January 2020, I paid a visit to the imposing headquarters of *The New York Times*, for a conversation with their editorial board, in hopes of getting an endorsement. I failed in that hope (the paper jointly endorsed Amy Klobuchar and Elizabeth Warren), but I received an endorsement that may have been of greater value.



9780316598484_PromiseMeAmerica_int_1P.indd 34 7/17/26 1:51 PM

Heading to the meeting, I had a lively conversation with Jacquelyn Brittany, the elevator operator. As we neared the end of our ride together, she blurted out, "I love you!" I asked her if she had her phone, and we took a selfie together. The moment quickly went viral. I think it solidified a feeling that was growing with the American people. The elites may not have been with me, but the American people were, and I was with them.

Jacquelyn later shared her take on our interaction: "I take powerful people up on my elevator all the time. When they get off, they go to their important meetings. Me, I just head back to the lobby. But in the short time I spent with Joe Biden, I could tell he really saw me. That he actually cared, that my life meant something to him. And I knew even when he went into his important meeting, he'd take my story in there with him."[6]

Over the next few months, I bounced from state to state on small planes, with a rotating group of core staffers: Bruce Reed, Annie Tomasini as my traveling chief of staff, Stephen Goepfert as my personal aide, Ashley Williams as my trip director, Adam Schultz as my photographer, and Drew Heskett as my videographer. Remi Yamamoto was my traveling press secretary. Advisers Symone Sanders and Kate Bedingfield would jump on trips. And when Jill was part of the trip, she was often accompanied by her most senior aide and confidant, Anthony Bernal.

After my eight years with access to Air Force Two and the office of the vice president, our operation felt like something I hadn't experienced in a long time: a start-up. Our team was small, nimble, passionate, and bonded together.

What we weren't was successful, at least not initially. In the Iowa caucuses, held on February 3, the vote-counting process had been confusing, owing to the caucus's use of a new technology, and the ultimate tally was delayed three days. By the time everything was settled, it was clear I had come in fourth, behind Pete Buttigieg, Bernie Sanders, and Elizabeth Warren.



9780316598484_PromiseMeAmerica_int_1P.indd 35 7/17/26 1:51 PM

In New Hampshire, on February 11, I came in fifth, losing by a wide margin to Bernie Sanders. Certainly, part of that result was because Bernie Sanders came from next-door Vermont. I felt that another major factor was that Iowa and New Hampshire, while wonderful places, are not very representative of the country at large. In Iowa, less than 5 percent of the population is African American. In New Hampshire, it's just over 2 percent. I was grateful for my supporters in those states, and I was disappointed I hadn't done better for them. My campaign staff and I felt that I had better prospects as the calendar turned to more representative states. Even before the results came in, I left New Hampshire for South Carolina, where I was gratified to find a standing-room-only multiracial crowd of enthusiastic supporters. One call I had to make before leaving was to former Governor John Lynch, our top New Hampshire surrogate. He had put a lot on the line for me, as had many others. He wasn't happy, but he was ultimately understanding of my early departure.

---

We knew the calendar would be more friendly from this point forward, but supporters also needed to see that our campaign understood the need to change. One of our key additions was Jen O'Malley Dillon, a widely respected political operative. Jen joined our Nevada effort and would later become our campaign manager. At the time, she was a sort of super-volunteer, who would either help resurrect our campaign or wind it down. Jen's modus operandi and most often-repeated refrain was "we can do hard things" — she would prove that to be true time and again.

She and Steve felt — and I agreed — that Nevada would be an important place to prove out our contention that when primary states started looking like the general electorate, I would do better. Our campaign was holding out hope for South Carolina, but Jen pointed out



9780316598484_PromiseMeAmerica_int_1P.indd 36 7/17/26 1:51 PM

that we were running on fumes and would need a springboard to vault us into contention there. We didn't have much money to spend, so I focused my energies on the communities of color that simply didn't exist in sizable numbers in Iowa or New Hampshire. On February 22, in Nevada, I came in second place. But I was still well behind Bernie Sanders, and my improved performance didn't stop the political elites and the mainstream media types from continuing to write my political obituary.

We may have been on our last legs, but my campaign was alive. South Carolina, the following week, would be our last stand.

The South Carolina primary was held on February 29. I had deep friendships in South Carolina. I had always gotten along well with South Carolinians, from all backgrounds. When I was elected to the Senate in 1972, Fritz Hollings was already a giant (he served from 1966 to 2005), and he was another one of that handful of senators who kept me from quitting the Senate before I ever served. I will always be grateful for his friendship. Similarly, I cannot say enough about another South Carolinian who was one of my closest friends. Jim Clyburn became a revered leader of the House after many decades of service, in which he won widespread admiration for his values. His constituents always came first, and he knew that I felt the same way about mine. Jim wasn't just a keen observer of current events; his experience as a historian — through his academic training and his high school teaching and as a writer himself — gave Jim remarkable perspective as a politician, with an instinct for identifying the moments when it was critical to stand up and speak out.

In this cycle, it would be Jim who put his remarkable powers of persuasion to work for me at a time when I really needed it.

"I know Joe Biden," he said three days before the primary to his constituents, many of whom were African American. "I know his character, his heart, and his record. Joe Biden has stood for the hard-working people of South Carolina. We know Joe. But more importantly, he knows us."[7]



9780316598484_PromiseMeAmerica_int_1P.indd 37 7/17/26 1:51 PM

That was no exaggeration; I had always found a strong base of support in Wilmington's Black community, back in my home state, and I thoroughly enjoyed campaigning with Jim throughout South Carolina. He had long been a staunch ally, and now we were both finding strength and purpose in our work together. Like me, Jim was contending with a deeply painful loss. Emily, his wife of fifty-eight years, had died just five months earlier. Before she went to her reward, she told Jim that she thought I was the "best bet" to defeat Donald Trump.[8]

I had been so many times to South Carolina over the years, but one visit was especially meaningful. Perhaps the most moving experience of my vice presidency was the day that Barack Obama and I went to Charleston, in June 2015, to help the community heal in the wake of a terrible tragedy, the killing of nine people, all Black, by a white supremacist. It was just weeks after Beau's passing, and I lingered long after the extraordinary service, at which Barack sang "Amazing Grace," and I remember many searing conversations, including with Jim. Throughout a long afternoon of sorrow, Jill and I met with hundreds of South Carolinians and shared their pain. It felt as if we were helping one another heal.

Some of that feeling of lifting one another up still seemed to be in the air, five years later. Well before the primary result, I could feel a remarkable momentum building. You could just tell; there was an electricity to the campaign events, whether in cities like Charleston and Columbia or in smaller communities like Swansea and Orangeburg. It was especially palpable in Black churches, where huge crowds came out to listen to me and, inevitably, to clap and cheer and bring their own form of good news. I don't know if they were giving me inspiration or the other way around, but that night I swept the state. In my victory speech, I said what I had felt to be true all along: "To everyone who has been knocked down, counted out, or left behind — this is your campaign."

As I think back to South Carolina and why its people stood up for me, I fall back on something I have been saying throughout my life.



9780316598484_PromiseMeAmerica_int_1P.indd 38 7/17/26 1:51 PM

All politics is personal. People want their elected leaders to stand up for them on the big questions; that goes without saying. But they also want to vote for people who show up and listen and enjoy being with them. That is a side of politics that the pundits often fail to appreciate.

---

From the big win in South Carolina, momentum just kept building. We headed off to planned campaign stops in Houston and then Dallas. We woke up in Houston on March 2 and learned that Amy Klobuchar was planning to drop out of the race and wanted to come meet up in Dallas for an endorsement event. We were hearing similar rumblings from the Pete Buttigieg camp. We delayed my morning flight, and over the next several hours, my campaign went into a dizzying negotiation, attempting to coordinate with representatives for Amy, Pete, and Beto O'Rourke, who had dropped out of the race earlier in the year. I wanted each of them to have their own moment.

By the time we went to bed that night, I had secured those three endorsements at a series of events, including one we spent standing in the backyard of a fried chicken restaurant, and another a rally that was so energized the stage was shaking — literally. At that rally Beto O'Rourke told the crowd that after the event, he'd be taking me to Whataburger for a "world-class meal." He did, and it was.

Our campaign was working our way from east to west — chasing the sun and using the extra daylight to pile on more events and stops.

The next day, Super Tuesday, we flew to California. By the time I took the stage that night, we'd won ten more primaries, from Massachusetts to Minnesota to Texas. Mayor Bloomberg left the race and also pledged to join my campaign. On March 10, we won five more primaries. Our meager coffers were starting to fill. Voters were flocking to my campaign. This ten-day period was one of the greatest comebacks in modern campaign history. The rallies and events became electric. I'll never forget the ecstatic looks on the faces of my family

and staff. The energy was everywhere: on the road, around the country, and back at our headquarters in Philadelphia. What we were all experiencing was pure joy.

Then the world shut down.

## THE COVID YEAR

Of course, we were quite aware of the medical emergency that was gripping the world in the early weeks of 2020. On December 31, 2019, an email was sent to the inboxes of senior leadership at the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention in Atlanta. It came from the CDC's Beijing office, where a team of researchers were hearing unofficial reports of a curious new virus in China's eighth-largest city, Wuhan, the capital of Hubei Province. The virus, still nameless, caused pneumonia-like symptoms and was highly contagious.[9]

After the SARS epidemic of 2003, China and the United States, along with other countries, had agreed to share reports of any new viruses through a global software system called ProMED. But the Chinese were not sending out official reports yet, showing a pattern of incomplete communication that would plague the world throughout 2020 and make it that much harder to recover from what would first be called the coronavirus, and then COVID.

COVID would ultimately kill over seven million people worldwide, officially; the unofficial toll may have been three or four times higher.[10] It became the worst pandemic in a century, occurring almost exactly one hundred years after the devastating Spanish flu of 1918–20, which killed a reported fifty million people.[11]

The United States has an outstanding public health apparatus, built and refined over generations and led by researchers, physicians, and administrators who have put evidence ahead of any political ideology. For most of the last century, American science has been the envy of the world. We should have been the best-prepared nation on earth for what was, in a sense, an invasion.



9780316508484_PromiseMeAmerica_int_1P.indd 40 7/17/26 1:51 PM

Yet week by week, it was becoming painfully clear that President Trump was not able to defend us from this invasion. We needed transparency, clarity, and scientific knowledge. Our best presidents have always offered this. As we were fighting for our independence, George Washington had to battle a smallpox epidemic, in addition to the British. Between 1777 and 1778, at a very delicate moment in the American Revolution, he made the brave decision to inoculate the Continental army. "Inoculate your men as fast as they are enlisted," he wrote to a colonel in Virginia. We may owe the very existence of our country to his vigilance.[12]

In two of the great crises of our history, the Civil War and World War II, that was the kind of leadership displayed by two of our greatest presidents, Abraham Lincoln and Franklin D. Roosevelt. In both cases, it led to inspiring results. Even as they campaigned against each other in 1940, FDR, a Democrat, and Wendell Willkie, a Republican, presented a united front before a grim world picture.

Instead, when we needed facts, President Trump told us lies. When we needed sober assessments, we were offered absurd predictions. In February 2020, Donald Trump predicted that caseloads in the United States would soon be "close to zero."[13] Without explaining the science, he predicted that, "like a miracle, it will disappear." Then in the dark days of March, as cases were cascading, he predicted a "victory that, in my opinion, will happen much sooner than originally expected."[14] In April, he repeated, "It is going away." Then, when that failed to happen, we heard vitriolic attacks against China and, worse, against the American scientists who were doing so much to protect us.

Our leading public health officials, like Anthony Fauci (who had faithfully served presidents of both parties, going back to Ronald Reagan), were subjected to extraordinary public harassment that continues to this day. When the pandemic struck, Dr. Fauci, the director of the National Institute of Allergy and Infectious Diseases, was perhaps the most admired public health official in the country,



9780316598484_PromiseMeAmerica_int_1P.indd 41 7/17/26 1:51 PM

having protected Americans from HIV/AIDS, swine flu, and Ebola, among other diseases. In fact, at the start of his career he had often been attacked from the left, by AIDS activists who felt he moved too slowly; but now it was the right that came after him, with a vengeance, after prompts and prods from the administration. In October, the president called Dr. Fauci a "disaster" who had "been around for five hundred years," as if his experience were a bad thing, and complained that "people are tired of hearing Fauci and these idiots." Accordingly, trust in Dr. Fauci plummeted.[15] I knew the opposite to be true. Anthony Fauci is a patriot, and he was instrumental in orchestrating our recovery.

Every day, it seemed the president found new ways to undermine public confidence. He either did not know the facts or was simply contemptuous of them. Famously, he speculated about bleach and hydroxychloroquine as "cures." He whipsawed between praise for China's cooperation and accusations that China had deliberately created the virus. He promoted dangerous theories of "herd immunity" that would expose more Americans to risk and inevitably infect them.[16]

Social media was having a field day, promoting alarmist content with no basis in reality. Rumors were spreading that a mysterious lab in Wuhan was secretly owned by George Soros, that the virus came with a mind-control chip implanted by Bill Gates, that wearing a mask caused a person to be asphyxiated by carbon dioxide.[17] All of these claims were ridiculous; but in the fact-free environment promoted by the White House, it was difficult to separate reality from nonsense. During the pandemic, distrust in scientists nearly doubled.[18]

There were occasional bright spots. Operation Warp Speed produced a working vaccine within a year of the outbreak. But the administration never developed a plan to actually get the vaccine into arms, and they fell far short of their promises to immunize twenty million people by December 2020.[19] As the administration was developing vaccines, it was also sowing distrust of vaccines. It was a profoundly mixed message; sometimes the president bragged about Warp Speed,

but at other times (and increasingly over the years), he seemed wary of any vaccine or expert. It was as if the MAGA base were leading him, and not the other way around.

In fact, the overall pandemic response of the United States was dismal, as compared to other Western nations. Even with our unmatched research labs, our huge budgets, and our superbly trained doctors, we failed to get our act together for a long time. One think tank conducted a detailed analysis of how the world's countries fared during the pandemic's first year, and the United States came in ninety-fourth out of ninety-eight, sandwiched between Bolivia and Iran. Our death rate was nearly two and a half times that of Canada, our neighbor to the north.[20]

By the end of 2020, before I was sworn in, we had more cases and more deaths than any other country on earth. Even though the United States has only 4 percent of the world's population, we accounted for nearly 25 percent of COVID fatalities. A Lancet Commission report estimated that 40 percent of those deaths (or 160,000 people) could have been prevented if the United States had merely followed the same policies as other advanced countries.[21]

That failure was the direct result of an inadequate White House response that preferred fantasy and finger-pointing to dealing with reality. The sitting administration failed to send out huge federal stockpiles of medical supplies (while claiming that the stockpiles didn't exist); it refused to take a leadership role, asking the states to handle their own problems (while denying them the resources to do so); and it veered wildly between inconsistent messages about best practices. Should schools close? Or open? It was impossible to know from the words of a feckless president.

Others did step up. I will never forget the heroism of our medical professionals, emergency workers, delivery truck drivers, and all the people who selflessly served their communities in those dark days, keeping people safe, fed, and cared for. Many mayors and governors stepped up too, giving detailed, candid briefings to their citizens.

Political differences seemed to matter less, as many leaders from both parties did all they could to provide reliable information. I, too, began to put a lot of time in every day, talking to medical professionals and public health officials, so that I could offer responsible advice to people who were desperate for information and leadership.

We needed straight talk, from our elected leaders, and from health experts. Instead, the experts were belittled when they did not parrot the administration's false promises that a return to health was imminent. The anti-expert groundswell was not unique to Americans; many countries faced similar problems. But the problem was worse here in America, during a public health emergency when we truly needed the right guidance to keep our people alive. What could be more important? But millions had become conditioned to distrust everything said by government authorities, while uncritically accepting the wildest conspiracy theories. As it turned out, COVID was more than just a health crisis; it was also a serious test of our democracy.

## THE CAMPAIGN RESUMES

The public health crisis started to become a political crisis for the president. As the disconnect kept growing between his statements and the observable reality on the ground, independents and many Republicans also began to show skepticism toward an administration that was clearly in over its head. The more strenuously he insisted that everything was fine, the more people began to doubt him.

That skepticism has been seen at other times in our history, such as in the aftermath of the Iraq War, or Hurricane Katrina, or the 2008 financial crisis, when the American people had clearly seen enough of the George W. Bush administration. Or in 1932, when the people tired of Herbert Hoover's promise, three years into the Depression, that prosperity was "just around the corner."

President Trump had used a similar phrase about a cure for COVID. Once again, the people were looking askance at a president

who was constantly promising miracles and failing to deliver. In contrast, I proposed detailed, practical solutions and tried to offer a common-sense approach, including wearing masks, scaling up testing, working with mayors and governors to get them what they needed, pumping relief funding into the economy, lowering the prices for drugs and vaccines, donating vaccines to other countries, and restoring funding to the World Health Organization (which President Trump had cut, with predictably catastrophic results). I think the American people liked what I was saying; it was calming for the simple reason that it offered a realistic plan that would work.

That is not to say that the campaign was easy, or a foregone conclusion. It was anything but. Everything was topsy-turvy in a year that broke all the rules for campaigning. When we shut down our campaign offices on March 13, we thought it would be for a few weeks. It ended up being for the duration. In the past, I loved the chance to get out there, shake hands, and mingle with the people — the heart of any campaign. What could be better? They are our bosses, and I like hearing from them. You can almost feel the mood of the country in your fingertips. I was looking forward to sixteen-hour days, getting my message around the country, one doorbell at a time.

That would not be possible in 2020, as it turned out. It was important to set the right example, and we did. Everyone in my campaign followed strict protocols.

We had to get creative. For starters, we turned the lower level of my Delaware home into a fully functioning studio. Out went the couch and the pool table — in came a whole lot of audiovisual equipment. (The room is not technically a basement, as the house is built into a hill and the lower level opens to the lake behind it, but the idea that I was campaigning "from my basement" became a convenient shorthand for a right-wing media that wanted to portray me as out of touch.)

I felt that experience made me very much in touch. After all, Americans were isolated and hurting and needed to know that the



9780316598484_PromiseMeAmerica_int_1P.indd 45 7/17/26 1:51 PM

candidates understood their pain and uncertainty. I tried to connect with families who were suffering the loss of a loved one — too many already had an empty chair at the dining table. And I made sure to connect with people on the front lines, like the doctors and nurses who had to shower and mask up as soon as they came home from work, before they could even give their kids a hug.

Our plans to defeat COVID began well before the election. Starting in March 2020, recognizing that I would be the Democratic nominee and would need to manage — and, God willing, end — the pandemic should I become president, I requested regular briefings from David A. Kessler (who would become the chief science officer at the Department of Health and Human Services) and Vivek Murthy (who would become my surgeon general), both talented physicians and public health experts. We were joined in these briefings by Natalie Quillian. Although Natalie's background was in foreign policy and national security, she was the consummate problem solver and stepped in to run the operations side of my campaign. When COVID became our defining operational impediment, she began managing that, and evolved into a valuable COVID adviser in the process.

Over six years later, many of us have already forgotten the fear and confusion of that time. In one of our earliest briefings, Dr. Murthy informed me that the NCAA was considering shutting down March Madness; they announced that cancelation on March 12. The day before, the NBA had suspended the 2019–20 season indefinitely. These decisions signaled to the country that something was profoundly wrong and this was not just going to be another bad flu season or something like that.

One of the challenges, both for our campaign and for the nation, was rapid tests. They simply weren't being developed at scale. In order to make sure people were tested and safe at our events, our campaign spent tens of millions of dollars on tests, masks, partitions, extra space. Again, we were trying to model thoughtful and safe behavior.



9780316598484_PromiseMeAmerica_int_1P.indd 46 7/17/26 1:51 PM

I wanted to learn everything I could about the virus, and I peppered our experts with questions about the virus's biology, the nature of coronaviruses, and the development of vaccines (none were available at that point). I wanted data on caseloads, projections, and trends. The team always said they were briefing me. That was diplomatic. They were schooling me.

I remember one meeting in particular in late October when the caseload projection was coming into focus, and it dawned on us that the virus would peak in January 2021 — with more than one hundred thousand new cases a day. Everyone was silent for a moment as it became clear what I would inherit on day one.

---

By March 2020, there were only two realistic contenders for the Democratic nomination still standing, me and Bernie Sanders, and we were scheduled to meet for a one-on-one debate on March 15. There were significant COVID protocols put in place, and for the first time in the election cycle, we debated in one of CNN's studios in Washington, DC, with no audience, no war room set up for rapid response, no "spin room" afterward to engage reporters. So on this night, it was just me, Bernie, the moderators Dana Bash and Jake Tapper, and viewers.

Senator Sanders and I certainly didn't see eye to eye on every area of policy, and despite each having served in the Senate for a long time, we'd overlapped for only two years. But there was always a mutual respect between us. We had the ability to disagree without it getting personal. We knew that no difference between the two of us was worth a bloody fight that would only advantage Donald Trump.

Ultimately, I chose to use the debate to make an announcement that had long been on my mind: If I became the nominee, I would choose a woman as my running mate. I'd spent eight years seeing what it meant to so many people that in Barack Obama, they had a



9780316598484_PromiseMeAmerica_int_1P.indd 47 7/17/26 1:51 PM

president who looked like them. I'd long been aware that more than half the country had never seen themselves reflected in the president or vice president. I know some analysts chalked the announcement up to political calculation. It wasn't. We never polled the question. It was just the right thing to do, and if I was the Democratic nominee, I would take the opportunity to do it.

On April 8, Bernie withdrew, and within a week he endorsed me in a livestream virtual event. We pledged to work together on areas of policy, creating several task forces that included representatives from Bernie's campaign team with a core focus on the economy, education, and criminal justice. His endorsement helped me expand my support further, and I was grateful for it.

Bernie's withdrawal also meant several things. First, as the presumptive Democratic nominee, I once again became a Secret Service protectee. This meant that the Secret Service would return to using the code names we had chosen when I was vice president — with tradition dictating that everyone's code name start with the same letter as mine, which was Celtic. Hilariously, the grandkids were stuck with the names they had chosen twelve years earlier — Coaster, Cookie, Cowboy, and Cricket. The only code name that changed was that of Little Hunter, Beau's son. He inherited his father's code name: Captain.

It also meant that American voters would be looking more closely at the plans and policies I had rolled out over the previous year — on infrastructure, climate, tax reform, health care, prescription drugs, education, housing, childcare, and civil rights. I saw the COVID crisis amplifying the deep economic problems that had motivated me to enter politics in the first place. Over the next several months, in four major speeches, I laid out my plans to help America build back better.

1. We needed to strengthen America's industrial base, the long-term source of middle-class job creation. I rejected the defeatist view that automation and globalization meant we couldn't ensure our future was made in America. I had

a vision for goods and services that were American made in American supply chains — like American steel for our buildings and energy-efficient vehicles.

2. We needed a more resilient economy for the long term, which meant modernizing and strengthening America's infrastructure, building a clean energy economy, and creating millions of high-quality union jobs in the process.
3. We needed to recognize the immense burden on working parents and caregivers; bringing costs down and making education and childcare more affordable.
4. We needed, as a nation, to confront the costs of racism and work to close the wealth gap. In practice, that meant efforts like increasing federal contracts with small and disadvantaged businesses.

All told, it was an ambitious agenda, built on my belief that America's economy doesn't grow from the top down; it grows from the bottom up, and from the middle out.

Being the presumptive nominee also meant I could turn my attention to choosing a running mate. I spoke with Ron Klain about the qualities I was looking for in a vice president. He worked with adviser Anita Dunn and attorney Bob Bauer, along with Dana Remus, who would become my White House counsel, to put together an initial list of candidates and a selection process.

By May, we had a list of twelve potential candidates who were willing to put themselves through a thorough and invasive vetting process, including interviews with my selection team. Because of COVID, I couldn't do joint rallies with them, to get a sense of how we worked together in front of a live crowd. I did try to get a sense of them from their surrogate work, as did Jill and others. People on my vetting team lobbied for their favorites, while Jill and I kept our opinions close.



9780316598484_PromiseMeAmerica_int_1P.indd 49 7/17/26 1:51 PM

Serious challenges remained, and in many ways, they were intensifying. Unemployment grew to nearly 15 percent at one point, and the economy was shuddering, with so many people out of work.

Far from Wall Street, COVID was unsettling things in other ways. On May 25, a terrible tragedy unfolded in Minneapolis, where George Floyd, who had lost his job to the pandemic, allegedly tried to pass a counterfeit twenty-dollar bill at a small convenience store. When the police were called, one of the officers, Derek Chauvin, subdued Floyd and, with a knee on his neck, slowly asphyxiated him while local witnesses filmed him with their cell phones. The images went viral.

Floyd's murder, recorded in real time, set off a furious reaction and the launch of a nationwide movement to affirm that "Black Lives Matter." As those protests ricocheted around the country, we once again needed a president to lower the temperature and reassure the American people. That's what leaders do. Instead, Donald Trump inflamed the situation and threatened to send armed troops into cities where anyone was protesting.

I began traveling again, beginning with a Memorial Day wreath laying at Veterans Memorial Park in Wilmington. A couple of days later I would join Congresswoman Lisa Blunt Rochester to tour the damage the city had sustained in uprisings after George Floyd's killing. As I was walking, I ran into Logan Herring and his son. Logan, grandson of the late Reverend Otis Herring, runs a community center on the East Side of Wilmington. I squatted down to talk to his son. We were masked, and at a distance, but it felt so meaningful to be rediscovering these small moments of connection at a time of so much confusion and fear.

On June 5, after several of the later primaries, I officially secured the nomination. To commemorate the milestone, my granddaughter Natalie and Jill presented me a platter on which the magic delegate count number — 1,991 — was written out in Dove ice cream bars.

A few days later, Jill and I flew to Houston to be with the Floyd family, community leaders, and national leaders like Reverend Al

Sharpton. We met at a local restaurant, Lucille's. We prayed together. We talked about the tensions taking place across the country. We spent time with his family, including his daughter, who said to me, "My daddy changed the world." Those words would stick with me.

Meanwhile, my vice presidential search intensified. It was an embarrassment of talent.

I particularly enjoyed talking with Susan Rice, whom I respected immensely from her time as Barack's national security adviser. Although she ultimately withdrew from consideration, I was glad she agreed to join my administration and bring intellect and a determination to get things done to the role of director of my Domestic Policy Council. The same went for Gina Raimondo, who would become indispensable to my legislative successes as secretary of commerce.

When I got close to a final decision, I wanted in-person meetings. The logistics — due to both COVID and the desire to keep the decision process secret — made that tricky. For example, I wanted to meet with Governor Gretchen Whitmer of Michigan. Getting a governor from Michigan to Delaware unnoticed isn't easy. To eliminate any paper trail, Anthony Bernal booked a private plane on his personal American Express card. He and Annie Tomasini picked up Governor Whitmer and her one state trooper at the airport and drove her to my home in Rehoboth, parking in the garage and closing the door before getting out of the rented SUV. Governor Whitmer brought with her a gift: beer from Michigan. Although I don't drink, she immediately earned bonus points with Jill.

It was only slightly less complicated to arrange a private meeting with Kamala Harris. At the end of July, we knew we'd both be in Washington for John Lewis's lying-in-state in the Capitol. Once again, Annie and Anthony arranged a semisecret operation. In this case, a member of Senator Harris's staff drove her to a shopping center in McLean, Virginia. Annie met them, and Senator Harris hopped from one car to the other. Together they drove to the house my family had rented nearby, overlooking the Potomac. Because we were



9780316598484_PromiseMeAmerica_int_1P.indd 51 7/17/26 1:51 PM

in the process of moving out of the rental home in Virginia back to Delaware, the house was all but empty.

Kamala had served as California's attorney general when Beau served as Delaware's, and he'd thought highly of her. I could see why: She had a record in California of taking on tough fights, and winning. In the Senate, I had watched her bring a prosecutor's precision to grilling Trump administration officials.

As I neared a decision, I proposed to Jill that we play what we called "the envelope game" — one of those things we did during COVID to pass the time — writing down our top three choices, slipping them into an envelope, swapping envelopes, and seeing if we were in agreement. Our choices didn't match exactly, but we were getting close.

Ron Klain came to the house and asked, point-blank, if I'd made a decision. Ron and I had always had a bit of a mind meld, so we said it almost simultaneously: "Harris."

I made a point of calling the other women I had considered for the role, telling them that they weren't the pick, and thanking them for being willing to serve. It's a testament to both my team and these leaders that from the start of the process to when I made my decision, nobody leaked a word.

On August 11, sitting in my home office in Wilmington, I called Kamala. I asked her, "Are you ready to go to work?" She replied, "Oh my God, I'm so ready to go to work." I had a running mate.

The next challenge was how to pull off a nominating convention with the pandemic still at full strength. It was originally scheduled to be held in Milwaukee from July 13 to 16, but after giving it some thought, we realized it was safer to have most of the delegates and speakers attend virtually, and the event was rescheduled for August 17 to 20.

I appreciated how much creativity went into pulling off an upbeat convention. During the roll call of delegates, each state was given a few extra seconds on video to feature its virtues and special qualities; the result was a positive and occasionally hilarious civics lesson that



9780316598484_PromiseMeAmerica_int_1P.indd 52 7/17/26 1:51 PM

brought back some of the excitement of an in-person convention. In the words of one commentator, "The convention rewrote the rules for using mass media to galvanize voters and invigorate a campaign."[22]

Still, I must say, I missed the real thing.

One of my favorite memories of the convention involves a young man I had met during my campaign. As the voters reminded me quite clearly on the day of the New Hampshire primary, I did not have all that many friends in New Hampshire. But thirteen-year-old Brayden Harrington was an exception.

When we met as I was campaigning, he asked me for pointers on how to overcome his stutter. I told him about a book of poems by Yeats I would read aloud to practice speaking. I showed him how I marked up my speeches in a way that made them easier for me to say aloud. We had such a good conversation that we stayed in touch, and I asked him to deliver a short speech to the convention, from his home. He was brave and vulnerable and pulled it off brilliantly, and his speech went viral. I think in some mystical way, this example of resilience and success gave strength to all Americans.[23]

My acceptance speech reflected the hard times we were all living through. I made a solemn promise: "Here and now, I give you my word: If you entrust me with the presidency, I will draw on the best of us, not the worst. I will be an ally of the light, not of the darkness."[24]

---

The darkness was still out there. As November 3 drew closer, President Trump continued his reckless tweets, insulting me constantly and insisting that COVID would soon be a thing of the past. That argument became less convincing when he and his wife, Melania, tested positive for COVID on October 2, after attending a crowded event in the Rose Garden to celebrate his nominee for the Supreme Court, Amy Coney Barrett. Thanks to extraordinary medical interventions, he survived, but his candidacy was beginning to look sicker.



9780316598484_PromiseMeAmerica_int_1P.indd 53 7/17/26 1:51 PM

In other ways, too, COVID infiltrated the election. President Trump and I met for two debates; it was originally supposed to be three, but when he was diagnosed with COVID, one of them was scrapped. In fact, he was probably experiencing early COVID symptoms on the night of our first debate, September 29 — and if so, he was endangering both candidates for the presidency, refusing to test and refusing to wear a mask, while standing only a few feet away from me.

Even before it started, he was making outrageous accusations, saying that I had a secret earpiece and that I was taking performance-enhancing drugs. During the debate, he planted doubts about the election, as usual, and refused to commit to a peaceful transfer, implying he would try to remain in office (as in fact proved to be the case). Americans heard the president interrupting me constantly before I finally said, "Will you shut up, man?" When I asked him to condemn white supremacists and militia groups like the Proud Boys, he said, "Stand back and stand by," a cryptic remark that was interpreted as an encouragement. The events of January 6, 2021, would bear out that theory.

I thought that his behavior perfectly encapsulated a thought that I had been trying to express in the Philadelphia speech that launched my campaign, back in May 2019:

> Our politics has become so mean, so petty, so personal, so negative, so partisan, so angry, and so unproductive. Instead of debating our opponents, we demonize them. Instead of questioning judgments, we question their motives. Instead of listening, we shout. Instead of looking for solutions, we look to score political points.

Unfortunately for the president, America was not in a mood to be yelled at, and Donald Trump was discovering that talking loudly did not make his message sound better. With so many of our



9780316598484_PromiseMeAmerica_int_1P.indd 54 7/17/26 1:51 PM

problems — COVID, the racial divide, the growing gulf between the United States and our allies — we needed a quieter tone, and leadership based on the facts, not bluster.

It's almost hard to remember it now, but when COVID initially paused the campaign in March, the very idea of Zoom meetings barely existed. Our campaign had to rethink everything. One memorable innovation was our "car rallies." I gave speeches to people in their cars in parking lots. That felt safer than a campaign rally. "Honk lines" replaced applause lines, as crowds would lean on their horns to support something I had just said. In speech after speech, I hit the same themes. We wanted a country that valued truth over lies, science over fiction, and hope over fear. And we wanted to heal, in every sense.

I thought Americans trusted me to do this work. I knew all about healing, having been toughened by tragedies of my own — the car crash that took my wife and daughter in 1972, a traumatic medical episode of my own in 1988, and Beau's death in 2015. The American people understood that I had been through serious setbacks — just as they had. We shared the experience of suffering and then finding purpose in our pain.

Still, the race felt like it was close, and it tightened at the end.

On Election Day, I went home, in a sense. I mean, I'm obviously from Delaware, and I love Delaware. It has made everything possible for me. But I'm also from Scranton, the city in Pennsylvania that we had to leave when my dad needed to look elsewhere for work. Scranton is such a proud place — the first city in Pennsylvania to have electrified streetcars, an important site of struggles for the dignity of organized labor, and once the capital of the anthracite coal industry before the bottom fell out of it.

The people of Scranton knew a lot about getting back up again, and I wanted to be there with them on Election Day. It was a powerful experience. That morning, I went to the home I'd lived in as a kid and saw Mrs. Anne Kearns, who'd bought the house from my family



9780316598484_PromiseMeAmerica_int_1P.indd 55 7/17/26 1:51 PM

in 1962 and had welcomed me back many times. I went through the living room and the kitchen and up to my old bedroom. Memories of my mom and my dad came flooding back, their sacrifices and life lessons. Before I walked out, one of Mrs. Kearns's sons handed me a Sharpie and asked me to write a message on the wall. I took just a minute staring at the blank wall and wrote what was in my heart: "From this house to the White House with the grace of God." I meant it. I turned to my two granddaughters and staff standing behind me. They all had tears in their eyes.[25]

---

On Election Day, all our models showed that I was winning, hitting our turnout targets. But counting the votes took time, especially in densely populated areas. This of course creates electoral mirages, where results from rural and more sparsely populated areas, frequently the more conservative areas, arrive first, while vote-by-mail ballots — generally Democratic leaning — are counted last, giving the impression of conservative overperformance.

Hour by hour, on Wednesday, November 4, we learned that some swing states (Arizona, Maine, Wisconsin, and Michigan) had gone my way, while among the outstanding swing states, only North Carolina was looking good for Trump.

Meanwhile, I knew I would need to govern once the results became official, so that afternoon Kamala and I convened the economic and policy advisers who would become our administration team: Ben Harris, who would serve at Treasury; Jake Sullivan, who would become my national security adviser; Stef Feldman, who had run policy for the campaign and would become one of my domestic policy advisers; Jared Bernstein, who would serve on and later lead my Council of Economic Advisers; Heather Boushey, a labor economist and expert in the relationship between inequality and economic



9780316598484_PromiseMeAmerica_int_1P.indd 56 7/17/26 1:51 PM

growth, who would also join my Council of Economic Advisers; and my long-term confidant Bruce Reed. As we worked on plans to strengthen the economy we were about to inherit, slowly, agonizingly, the results continued to come in.

Over the next four days, I addressed the American people several times, asking for their patience as the votes were counted. While careful not to prematurely declare victory, by November 6 I felt confident enough to declare publicly that we were going to win the race.

My family had gathered at my home in Wilmington, which we'd christened the Lake House. I'd bought the land when Beau and Hunter started their own families and we no longer needed our previous home, which was stately and beautiful and had served us well, but which Jill frequently reminded me was a maintenance nightmare and far more than we needed. In the two years it took us to design and build the new home, we had hopscotched from rental to rental. We moved in just in time for Christmas of 1998. I loved everything about the Lake House. The long driveway that slowly revealed the home. The library, which doubled as my office, with its dark wood and leather sofas and a lifetime of political and family memorabilia. That's where we held family meetings. A guest house where my mother was able to live independently but close to us in the final years of her life.

Starting on Election Day, the house had been buzzing with family and staff, all of whom were tested for COVID before arriving. It was a strange period of limbo. We were confident we had won but had to wait for the results to become official.

On the morning of Saturday, November 7, Jill and I decided to walk down to the dock on the lake to give ourselves some space. The day Beau passed away, I had returned to Wilmington from Walter Reed Medical Center and had gone to sit out on the dock, in that very spot. At the time, an eagle had made its nest there. And on that day, it took off from its nest and flew directly toward me, perhaps



9780316508484_PromiseMeAmerica_int_1P.indd 57 7/17/26 1:51 PM

thirty feet above the water. When it was almost directly above me, it made a looping circle around the lake before flying away.

I was deep in thought when, shortly after 11 a.m., we heard a scream go up from one room of the house, then another. I turned around to see my grandchildren streaming onto the patio, calling for me. They had just heard the networks calling Pennsylvania, and the election, for me. The full house got even fuller when my sister, Val, arrived with her daughters, Missy and Casey. They had been getting tested for COVID when the race was called, and hurried over. Surrounded by family, I couldn't possibly have asked for a better way to receive the news.

I took pride in the fact that we had run a clean and truthful campaign. The size of the final vote — representing the highest number of Americans who had ever voted in an election, more than 158 million — was in itself a validation of democracy. That was precisely what I was hoping for — to show the world that America was back.

That evening from the Chase Center parking lot, full of carefully spaced Jeeps containing family members, loyal advisers, and longtime friends from Delaware and beyond, I delivered my victory speech. I told the American people:

> I pledge to be a president who seeks not to divide but unify, who doesn't see red states and blue states, only sees a United States.

That was my promise and remained my North Star during my presidency. There was one moment I will never forget. A fireworks and drone show followed my speech. The last image was the number 46, marking my place in history as the soon-to-be forty-sixth president of the United States. Soon, the image was surrounded by stars — the car horns were deafening. In the distance, the music caught my ear: "A Sky Full of Stars" by Coldplay. This was Beau's favorite song. He was never far away from us.



9780316598484_PromiseMeAmerica_int_1P.indd 58 7/17/26 1:51 PM

## A TWILIGHT STRUGGLE: THE ELECTION AND THE POSTELECTION

An enormous amount of planning must take place to launch a new presidency. From election to inauguration there are eleven weeks to hire the thousands of people who must come in to staff an administration. In the meantime, the president-elect must speak reassuringly to the American people, make legislative priorities clear, and prepare an inaugural address that will be watched by millions.[26] To add to the difficulty, we had to do all this while observing COVID restrictions.

From the sprint of the campaign, we sprinted into the transition, with extensive hiring throughout November and December. These weeks were a whirlwind of interviews and calls, trying to recruit the most distinguished, ethical, and patriotic public servants into the rapidly forming Biden administration. That included assembling a cabinet who would work tirelessly on behalf of the American people. And, importantly, work well with one another. So much of what we were confronting would require a whole-of-government approach, so I wanted accomplished leaders who were also team players. One goal was to achieve unprecedented diversity in our first one hundred hires; this we achieved, with 61 percent women, 54 percent people of color, and nearly 20 percent first-generation Americans.[27]

My first announcement was on November 11, when I named Ron Klain as my chief of staff. In the days that followed, I named Antony Blinken as secretary of state, Alejandro Mayorkas as secretary of homeland security, Linda Thomas-Greenfield as UN ambassador, Janet Yellen as treasury secretary nominee, Brian Deese as director of the National Economic Council, Xavier Becerra as secretary of health and human services, Lloyd Austin as secretary of defense, Tom Vilsack to lead the Department of Agriculture, Marcia Fudge to lead the Department of Housing and Urban Development, Denis McDonough to lead Veterans Affairs, Pete Buttigieg as transportation secretary, Jennifer Granholm as energy secretary, Deb Haaland



9780316598484_PromiseMeAmerica_int_1P.indd 59 7/17/26 1:51 PM

as secretary of the interior, and Miguel Cardona as my education secretary. The day after the attacks of January 6, I announced Gina Raimondo for Commerce, Marty Walsh for Labor, Isabel Guzman for the Small Business Administration, and Merrick Garland as attorney general.

Each was at the peak of his or her profession and relished the chance to serve the American people. I was also proud that we had achieved a goal of great significance to me—and, I would add, to American history: We finally had a presidential administration that looked like the American people. My cabinet featured the first female treasury secretary, the first Native American cabinet secretary, the first openly gay Senate-confirmed secretary, the first Black secretary of defense, the first Latino and Cuban American homeland security secretary. As they introduced themselves in press conference after press conference, I found myself in awe of the journey each of them had taken; what it said about them, and what it said about America.

To coordinate their work, I asked Evan Ryan, a veteran of campaigns, the State Department, and my Office of Public Engagement when I was vice president, and whom I had known for two decades, to lead my Office of Cabinet Affairs, which she did with her signature poise and competence.

Of our twenty-five cabinet members, more than half were non-white, and nearly half were women.[28] My cabinet would also go on to be historic in another sense: They largely stayed intact, working alongside me, many for all four years. They served America well.

---

For my national security team, I turned to a group of accomplished and trusted confidants. For national security adviser, I chose Jake Sullivan, who had held that role for me when I was vice president, and I was consistently impressed by both his intellect and his temperament in dealing with the range of challenges we confronted. For his



9780316598484_PromiseMeAmerica_int_1P.indd 60 7/17/26 1:51 PM

principal deputy, I chose Jon Finer. Among other experiences, Jon had been a foreign and national correspondent for *The Washington Post,* where he reported from more than twenty countries. Part of Jon's job was to run what's called the Deputies Committee, essentially coordinating among the various military and intelligence recommendations that would be coming my way and implementing whatever decisions I would make. I selected Elizabeth Sherwood-Randall to be homeland security adviser; she had worked with me, on and off, since she was in her twenties, and her government service included distinguished stints at the Departments of Defense and Energy. By coincidence, all three of them had been Rhodes scholars, though to their credit, they were not the ones to ever let you know this.

---

I also assembled a history-making communications team, led by Communications Director Kate Bedingfield, who had held that role when I was vice president. Shortly after I announced my national security team, I had to decide who would serve as my press secretary, the public face of many of my announcements. For that role, I chose Jen Psaki, who had previously served as the spokesperson at the State Department and as White House communications director at the tail end of Barack Obama's presidency. When Jill and I sat down with her to offer her the job, she asked how she could work best with us. Jill was first to answer: "Be honest with us. Tell us what is coming." I added that I would be relying on her to help ensure that the entire administration communicated calmly and professionally. "The world will throw us enough chaos," I said. "I don't want you or my cabinet secretaries adding to it." As our meeting ended, I said, "Thanks for doing this." When she left, I realized I hadn't formally offered her the role. But like a good press secretary, she got the message: The job was hers.

The rest of the communications team included Karine Jean-Pierre as the principal deputy press secretary (and later press secretary, the



9780316598484_PromiseMeAmerica_int_1P.indd 61 7/17/26 1:51 PM

first Black person and first openly LGBTQ person to serve in that role), and Pili Tobar as deputy communications director. Symone Sanders, a rising talent at the time (and now a widely recognized one), became the chief spokesperson for Vice President Harris, with Ashley Etienne as the vice president's communications director. In addition, Elizabeth Alexander, who had worked with me while I was in the Senate and served as my press secretary when I was vice president, and was both a sharp litigator and skilled communicator, agreed to serve as Jill's communications director. We had unintentionally assembled a historic all-women senior communications team.

The only real break I took during this period of intense activity was over Thanksgiving. Since 1975, our family had spent Thanksgiving on the island of Nantucket. This year, because of COVID, we chose to spend it in Rehoboth. It was a break from tradition, and a break in another way as well. Two days after Thanksgiving, I was playing with our dog, Major, and took an awkward step. The rest of the day, I limped around until Stephen and Annie insisted I get it checked out. Sure enough, I had broken my foot. The doctor put me in a walking boot, which helped some. It might have been more help if I had been a better patient and worn it a bit more often.

---

The small window of time for my transition became even smaller when it became clear that Donald Trump was not going to respect the verdict of the American people. Earlier in 2020, he had warned that "the only way we're going to lose this election is if the election is rigged."[29]

Since the founding of the republic, election results had been overwhelmingly accepted by losing candidates, even under conditions in which it might have been possible to dispute the results. But now, with far less reason to argue, Donald Trump began to lay the groundwork for a new and sordid kind of contest, in the courts and in Congress, hoping for a different result.



9780316598484_PromiseMeAmerica_int_1P.indd 62 7/17/26 1:51 PM

It would have been hard to imagine such a desperate effort succeeding in any previous election. But by 2020 a growing fringe of people trusted what they saw on their phones more than their own sense of reason, willing to embrace whatever conspiracy theory came along.

The result was January 6, and the attack on the Capitol during the congressional vote to certify the election result. The actions of the mob were so outrageous that they disrupted another plan that might have worked better; Trump's allies in Congress were trying to call for a new round of voting in state legislatures, to overturn my victory. That dark day inevitably invoked echoes of the Civil War. Lincoln is always consoling in a time of national trauma, and during the short interval of two weeks that remained until the inauguration, I found myself thinking about a difficult question he had once asked, in a special message to Congress, delivered on July 4, 1861. Discussing the secession of eleven Southern states, he wondered if democracy was strong enough to survive.

"And this issue embraces more than the fate of these United States. It presents to the whole family of man the question whether a constitutional republic, or democracy — a government of the people by the same people — can or cannot maintain its territorial integrity against its own domestic foes."[30]

It would take the Union four years to find out, at great cost. But in the end, the nation survived. Moving forward, I felt confident of a similar outcome. I have always believed in the saying that it is better to light a candle than to curse the darkness. Even with great adversity before us, the days were getting longer again, and the light was returning.



9780316598484_PromiseMeAmerica_int_1P.indd 63 7/17/26 1:51 PM

CHAPTER THREE

# RESCUE

I ENTERED THE OVAL OFFICE FOR MY FIRST FULL DAY OF WORK on January 21, 2021.

I had been to the Oval Office more times than I could count, not only as vice president but in meetings going back to my days as a senator. Now it would be my workplace. The Oval Office is flanked by a small study and a private dining room, accessed through the Oval itself—places where I could sit by the fire and read, write, and work. Situated between the Oval Office and the Cabinet Room is an area known as the outer Oval. This was where my Oval Office operations team would sit—Annie Tomasini, along with Ashley Williams, my trip director, Stephen Goepfert, my personal aide, and Julia Reed, my assistant. For four years they, and then later Richard Ruffner and Jacob Spreyer, would become a family within the White House family—helping me navigate the chaos outside, and sometimes inside, the Oval itself.

My first day at work also marked the one-year anniversary, to the day, since the first case of COVID was identified in the United States.



9780316598484_PromiseMeAmerica_int_1P.indd 65 7/17/26 1:51 PM

Since that case, involving a man who had returned home from Wuhan, China, to Washington state, there had been at least twenty-four million identified cases of COVID in the country. But the numbers didn't tell the whole story. The real story was in the eyes of exhausted doctors and nurses in America's emergency rooms, working day and night. It just never let up.

It was in the look of fear in the eyes of seniors in nursing homes who knew this disease was coming for them more than anyone else. And the terror of knowing they would die alone.

It was in the tears of the family members putting their hands up against a pane of glass separating them from a loved one in a hospital room.

It was in the quiet tears of the son or daughter staring at an empty chair in their home because they never got to say goodbye to their mother or father.

COVID took so much away, even the ability to fulfill that most primitive of all human instincts: to bury the ones you loved.

---

COVID also necessitated changes in the mechanics of the White House, and the presidency. The West Wing of the White House is a cramped workspace. To keep people safe, some staffers alternated in-office and remote days. In-person meetings were minimized, so that people would occasionally find themselves on a videoconference with someone one room over. And in places where none of this was possible, like the room outside the Oval Office, plexiglass barriers were installed.

Travel is an essential tool of presidential leadership, and when the president travels anywhere, it is a massive undertaking, requiring advance staff, military, Secret Service, and others to descend on the president's destination, often for days. We worried about someone inadvertently bringing COVID into a community, or one of my events



9780316598484_PromiseMeAmerica_int_1P.indd 66 7/17/26 1:51 PM

spreading it. So, just as we had done with the lower level of my home, we turned a little-used auditorium in the south courtyard of the Eisenhower Executive Office Building on the White House complex into a studio of sorts. From South Court, as it came to be called, I could host events and videoconferences and make statements. The space was certainly more functional than presidential, but the team made several upgrades and improvements over time, and the space served an important purpose: It allowed me to connect and communicate.

## THE COVID STRATEGY

At the time, it was important to recognize that the virus was about more than caseloads. It was also about the unseen toll. What would be the effect of isolation on mental health? I felt the psychological impact would reverberate for a long time. What would be the impact on children, in terms of learning loss? How about nutrition, for the ones who depended on schools for free and reduced-price meals?

Had the outgoing administration considered any of this? Their refusal to accept the election result made it that much harder to coordinate health policy. As we were rapidly getting up to speed in November and December, it was difficult to find Trump officials to share ideas with. Even during the transition, the outgoing team was so uncooperative that we had to go directly to the pharmaceutical companies and test manufacturers to find out what was going on.

Regardless of what the outgoing team was or wasn't doing, we were already well on our way to developing a full-scale COVID response plan by the time of the election.

From my first moment in office, we went on what I described as a "wartime" footing with the virus.[1] Every resource, every tool I had at my disposal, would be thrown at the problem.

In December, during the transition, I had announced the creation of a new role: White House coronavirus response coordinator, tasked with managing the federal response to the virus. To run it, I chose



9780316598484_PromiseMeAmerica_int_1P.indd 67 7/17/26 1:51 PM

Jeff Zients. He had consulted for, built, and run large organizations. Among the several roles he'd occupied in the Obama administration, he had served in the newly created role of chief performance officer — with the job of making the federal government more streamlined and effective — and had stepped in to fix the rocky HealthCare.gov roll-out, before leading the National Economic Council. Jeff was also a staff favorite for another reason: He was an original investor in Call Your Mother, a very popular chain of bagel bakeries, which meant that you could count on bagel Wednesdays.

Jeff's role was to unify our national response, instead of the patchwork of responses across the fifty states that Trump had relied on.

My first full day in office, I convened a meeting with my COVID team in the State Dining Room. Attendees included Vice President Harris, Dr. Fauci, Jeff Zients, and Natalie Quillian. They provided me a rundown of what they'd put into motion that day, across the federal government. At the end of the meeting, I pulled Jeff aside and told him, "Look, I know it's going to be hard. Inevitably, there will be ups and downs. But tell me when there's a problem. Put it on the table. And together, we can solve it. Tell it to me straight and we can deal with it."

I wanted to be clear with all my team about how I expected them to communicate with me, and how I intended to communicate with the American people — tell the good and the bad. Americans can handle it.

I would take every step I could to get the virus under control and to save as many lives as possible.

Our first step was the biggest vaccination program in the nation's history. What I saw when I took office was truly shocking. The Trump administration's Operation Warp Speed was the public/private partnership that had helped develop multiple vaccines for COVID in less than a year. It was a powerful demonstration of America's immense medical and scientific capabilities, and a testament to the value of government investments in science and scientists. However, when I



9780316598484_PromiseMeAmerica_int_1P.indd 68 7/17/26 1:51 PM

came to office, fewer than four million people had been vaccinated. More stunning: There was no coherent plan to immunize the nation. Nothing.

In December, during my transition planning, I had set a goal of one hundred million shots in my first one hundred days in office. I was told by the press and others that this would be impossible. I have always believed that nothing is beyond the capacity of the American people when we work together.

I knew what it would take to make this goal a reality. First, the federal government had to maintain control of the total supply. We didn't want side markets or usurious pricing. We wanted free and fair distribution.

I had also committed to building mass vaccination sites. After all, it wasn't enough to produce and procure the vaccines; we had to get them into people's arms.

These commitments reminded me of a story the Irish writer Frank O'Connor had told: As children, he and his friends would make their way across the countryside. Upon reaching an orchard wall that seemed too high to climb over, they took off their hats and threw them over, giving themselves no choice but to follow.[2]

We had a plan; now we had to get to work.

My team set about establishing the vaccination sites across the country. Most of the centers had a drive-through or walk-up design. The program used active-duty military personnel as well as advisers from the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) and the CDC and countless volunteers and public health workers.

I made a deliberate decision to include the Department of Defense in this effort. A wartime effort means doing things you've never done before. Active-duty troops aren't normally deployed here at home, but the military knows how to execute in a time of crisis. FEMA has expertise in disasters, but they had never done anything like this before. They rose to the challenge, developing a strategy to support the vaccination sites. It's worth remembering that on day one,



9780316598484_PromiseMeAmerica_int_1P.indd 69 7/17/26 1:51 PM

I didn't have a secretary of defense, a secretary of health and human services, or a FEMA administrator. We relied on nonpolitical career employees to execute the early missions we laid out. Those people were invaluable — they saved lives.

After signing seventeen executive actions on day one, I signed a dozen more on day two and day three. They outlined our rapidly expanding response to COVID. I also thought it was important to convey my candid sense that the virus would get worse before it got better, and I did so. I knew that "history is going to measure whether we are up to the task."[3] I was determined that history would not find us wanting.

There were still a lot of challenges relating to the virus, with new variants coming in and a constant flow of disinformation relating to COVID in fact-free diatribes online.[4] The same week I took office, we heard the news that there were one hundred million confirmed cases around the world. At home, there had been constant divisions and distractions, as Americans argued about how to respond. These disagreements filtered into every walk of life — schools, workplaces, town halls, legislatures. Our most sacred democratic spaces were an ongoing showcase for democratic dysfunction, in no small part because of the lack of guidance Americans had been given from the Trump White House.

We never took our eye off the ball. Our scientists (and those of other nations) were making rapid strides to keep up. We used some of the government's war powers to respond to the COVID invasion by invoking the Defense Production Act — a 1950 law that gives the president the authority to control domestic industries for national defense, emergency preparations, and critical infrastructure needs. In this case, I deployed it to secure vaccine-manufacturing materials for the companies that were actually manufacturing the vaccines, and to increase the supply of at-home tests, masks, and gloves. And even within the first few days of my administration, we were starting to see the impact of our new policies.



9780316598484_PromiseMeAmerica_int_1P.indd 70 7/17/26 1:51 PM

On February 8, Kamala and I took a "virtual tour" (from our new South Court studio) of the mass vaccination site at State Farm Stadium in Glendale, home of the NFL's Arizona Cardinals. It was a remarkable demonstration of partnership: local, state, and federal; public and private; and the dedication of thousands of volunteers. One of the nurses told me she felt like she was giving a "dose of hope" with every shot. That comment said it all. That's what we were administering: hope.

We wanted to establish priorities, which included helping our most vulnerable groups first. That meant getting vaccines to senior citizens, people in nursing homes, and frontline health workers. Then we expanded the priority list to include teachers, school bus drivers, and childcare providers, so that we could get our schools functioning again. One month after we kicked off our program, nearly 80 percent of teachers had their first shot. More than seven million of these individuals were vaccinated through state programs and pharmacies. By April, the number of schools in virtual learning was down by half.

We were monitoring the success of these efforts, and the data was coming back in reassuring ways. The vaccine was working. Fatalities were rapidly dropping, and opening schools provided enormous relief to hardworking families. We began to scale up, opening vaccination sites around the country, including in neighborhoods that were skeptical of our efforts. Within the first month of the program, 65 percent of people vaccinated at the sites were racial and ethnic minorities.

A core principle of the program was that the vaccine had to be widely available, particularly in communities that are often ignored. To do that, we set a goal of ensuring that 90 percent of Americans had a free vaccine site within five miles of their home. To reach the poorest communities, my team created a mechanism to deliver vaccines to federally qualified health centers, which primarily serve Medicaid populations. Alongside this work, my administration set up centers in Black and Brown neighborhoods to address long-standing vaccine fear and skepticism, due to historical injustices.



9780316598484_PromiseMeAmerica_int_1P.indd 71 7/17/26 1:51 PM

On February 19, I traveled to Portage, Michigan, to visit a Pfizer manufacturing facility. Pfizer's CEO, Albert Bourla, and Governor Whitmer joined me. I noted that the previous week I had toured the Vaccine Research Center at the National Institutes of Health, to witness the miracle of science. Now, in this facility, I was witnessing the miracle of manufacturing—including the "freezer farm," where I walked alongside some 350 freezers, each capable of storing 360,000 doses of the vaccine. By February 25, my thirty-seventh day in office, we'd administered 50 million doses, beginning with essential workers and vulnerable populations. By mid-April, we had mass-produced so many vaccines that we had enough for everyone in the country, months ahead of what many thought possible. We got 40,000 pharmacies administering the vaccine. We reached 300 million shots in just 150 days.

It was one of the most monumental achievements in public health in history. In those 150 days, we saw a 90 percent drop in the number of COVID cases and the number of COVID deaths. A study published in September 2022 in the journal *Emerging Infectious Diseases* found that between January and November 2021, vaccinations saved 686,115 lives in the United States.[5]

It was also important to remember those we had lost. In my lapel pocket, I always keep a note card with my daily schedule. Going back to my time as vice president, I asked my staff to provide a running tally of the number of US service members killed in Iraq and Afghanistan. It was my way of keeping these men and women close to my heart and my thoughts. To me, rounding off figures when we were talking about lives was offensive. The exact number mattered. During the campaign, I asked for another number to be added, the number of Americans who had died from COVID. On February 20, that grim tally read 500,071. The extent of the loss was staggering. It needed to be recognized. I ordered flags lowered to half-staff. That evening at sunset we held a ceremony at the White House. We stood outside, with the curved exterior walls of the Diplomatic Reception Room behind



9780316598484_PromiseMeAmerica_int_1P.indd 72 7/17/26 1:51 PM

us, five hundred lit candles placed up and down the stairs and on the balcony above. The doorway was adorned with black crepe. It was a moving tableau of loss. The bells at the National Cathedral tolled five hundred times. I urged Americans to resist becoming numb to the sorrow and offered a plea to "end the politics and misinformation that has divided families, communities, and the country, and has cost too many lives already. It's not Democrats and Republicans who are dying from the virus. It's our fellow Americans."

On May 13, 2021, after a successful vaccine rollout, and with caseloads in decline, Dr. Rochelle Walensky, my director of the Centers for Disease Control, announced that it was safe for fully vaccinated people to stop wearing masks. It was an exciting return to normalcy. In the hallways, people laughed and joked about seeing the lower half of one another's faces for the first time. We began plans for a July Fourth White House celebration that truly marked our independence from the virus and the beginning of a "summer of freedom." We hosted more than one thousand essential workers and military families for a barbecue on the South Lawn of the White House; it was a wonderful event, and a wonderful moment. But despite tremendous progress, we were now facing a new variant of the virus that would continue to challenge us in the months ahead.

Let the record show, however, that we built a mass vaccination campaign with unprecedented speed and scale. We pioneered treatments that were highly effective and made them widely available. We administered 220 million shots in one hundred days, in such a way that equal percentages of white, Black, and Latino adults were vaccinated. We shipped COVID tests directly to people's doors. In four months, we went from fewer than half of America's schools being open to 99 percent.

We had a lot of other problems on our hands in the spring of 2021, but COVID was always the most urgent. It was my solemn duty to protect Americans from the invader, as I said many times. I'm proud of how my team and I lived up to that responsibility.



9780316598484_PromiseMeAmerica_int_1P.indd 73 7/17/26 1:51 PM

## THE AMERICAN RESCUE PLAN

There's an old joke in politics that the toughest job at the circus is cleaning up after the elephants. Coming into the White House in 2009, we had to help the economy recover from the Great Recession. President Obama asked me to direct our efforts, and I was proud of my role in securing the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act, which is credited with creating nearly two and a half million jobs and moving us past the Great Recession.

A little over a decade later, we had a chance to design a plan to once again bring the economy back to life, and in part because of that experience, I knew what to do.

A big part of what would come to be known as the American Rescue Plan was to carry out our COVID mission. That was job number one. Getting people vaccinated. Making sure states and localities had what they needed. Not only getting them what they needed to deal with COVID directly but also helping them pay for essential services like keeping teachers and cops and firefighters on the job.

The American Rescue Plan had another big goal. We had to get our economy moving.

I was thinking a lot about both FDR and his predecessor, Herbert Hoover. Our financial situation was not as dire as the Great Depression, but global markets had been severely roiled over the previous year, with high unemployment. In fact, Trump was the first president since Hoover to lose more jobs than he created. Of course, some of that was due to the pandemic. By the time of my inauguration, we were down nearly three million jobs from four years earlier.[6]

At its worst, the unemployment rate would soar to 14.8 percent. At times, there was a distinct feeling of panic in the air, often made worse by the fact that our president was essentially telling us that all our problems would simply vanish if we stopped thinking about them.

But I was worried about more than the virus itself. People were going hungry. And people were at risk of being evicted from their



9780316598484_PromiseMeAmerica_int_1P.indd 74 7/17/26 1:51 PM

homes. Without a paycheck, people couldn't feed themselves or their families. And they couldn't pay the mortgage or the rent.

To this day, I'm haunted by the images of long lines of cars waiting at distribution centers all around the country, just so people could get a box of food for their family. In San Antonio, Texas, more than ten thousand cars waited in line for emergency food aid at a single distribution event in April 2020. Traffic stretched for over five miles.

To me, that was unacceptable. I wanted Americans to know that I had their backs. I promised, "We cannot, will not let people go hungry. We cannot let people be evicted because of nothing they did themselves. We cannot watch people lose their jobs. We have to act. We have to act now."

On January 14, 2021, I gave a prime-time address laying out a two-step plan to turn the country around. It can be summarized simply. Step one: rescue. Step two: recovery.

A two-step plan of rescue and recovery. A two-step plan to build a bridge to the other side of the pandemic and economic crises we faced and then to make the longer-term investments that would yield a better, stronger, more secure America.

The American Rescue Plan was, of course, the rescue.

To keep teachers, cops, and firefighters on the job, it included substantial aid to state and local governments, funds for vaccine distribution, and funds to help schools safely reopen. It provided funds to keep public transportation systems, which had suffered a dramatic drop in ridership, running. Indeed, we had been getting calls nearly daily from governors whose states desperately needed funding to keep their public-sector workers and services afloat. New York's Andrew Cuomo was the chair of the National Governor's Association and then-governor of Arkansas, Asa Hutchinson, was the vice chair. (Leadership alternates between Democrats and Republicans.) The lobbying from the NGA was particularly persuasive and reminded me of why I love working with governors: They have to get stuff done.



9780316598484_PromiseMeAmerica_int_1P.indd 75 7/17/26 1:51 PM

My bill also included direct funding to Historically Black Colleges and Universities, to support students and help these schools, which often didn't have large endowments to fall back on, keep their doors open. Many union pension plans were on the verge of collapse, and the Rescue Plan invested billions to shore those up — both an economic lifeline and a significant demonstration of my commitment to be the most pro-union president in history.

The bill called for investment of $160 billion in the fight against COVID, buying supplies and tests and protecting frontline workers. It offered critical relief to more than fifteen thousand school districts so they could reopen safely. To help families, it extended unemployment benefits, lowered taxes (through an expansion of the earned income tax credit) and sent out checks of $1,400. It helped renters and homeowners to stay in their homes, even if behind on their rents or mortgages. It offered a large expansion of the child tax credit. The expansion of the child tax credit alone was one of the largest antipoverty programs in US history. It increased the amount of the tax credit that families received from $2,000 per child to $3,600 for children under the age of six and $3,000 for children between the ages of six and seventeen. It made the credit advanceable and refundable, meaning that families would get the full value of the credit even if the credit exceeded the amount they paid in taxes. And for the first time, half of it would be paid out in monthly installments, so families wouldn't have to wait for tax time to get the full benefit. Indeed, I was particularly proud that we had gotten this tax credit to reach tens of millions of families within a few short months of the legislation passing. Recipients came to expect those funds in their bank accounts on the fifteenth of every month. It gave parents the ability to say, "Honey, you can get your braces now. We can get you a tutor to help you in the math class you're having trouble with. We can get you the sports equipment you need so you can sign up for your first team you're going to play on." It gave parents something beyond money: It gave them dignity. And with that one provision of the Rescue Plan, we cut child poverty in half.



9780316598484_PromiseMeAmerica_int_1P.indd 76 7/17/26 1:51 PM

Similarly, the $1,400 stimulus checks helped to prevent widespread poverty. They reached all but upper-income Americans, and the vast majority of recipients used them to pay for monthly expenses and household essentials.[7] This pushed the economy toward recovery and, again, delivered dignity for millions of families.

There were other initiatives in the bill as well — such as summer nutrition benefits, to help impoverished families feed their children when they were not in school. It included grants for childcare centers and subsidies to help families pay lower premiums for health insurance. The total price tag was $1.9 trillion. It was comprehensive, but so was the need.

Indeed, the American Rescue Plan was so comprehensive that even relatively small provisions had major impacts. One example was the Restaurant Revitalization Fund. One of the devastating aspects of the pandemic was the impact it had on small businesses, and restaurants in particular. Restaurants are often the first rung on the economic ladder for workers and small business owners. They're woven into the fabric of our communities, and they were hurting. People quite simply weren't going out to eat in large numbers. We set up this fund that allowed restaurants to apply for grants to cover the amount of revenue loss they experienced. Within twenty-one days of signing the law, we had approved over seventy-two thousand restaurants. By the end of the program, thanks to the hard work of my small business administrator, Isabel Casillas Guzman, and her team, we would approve more than one hundred thousand. Sixty percent of these were women-owned businesses. Nearly half were economically disadvantaged in some way, in either their ownership or the communities they served. This one program kept an estimated nine hundred thousand workers employed. That's the kind of federal investment that leaves a good taste in your mouth.

I had come into office promising to be a president for all Americans and to work with anyone who was willing to work with me to solve the crises we were facing. It wasn't a new approach for me. I had



9780316598484_PromiseMeAmerica_int_1P.indd 77 7/17/26 1:51 PM

earned a reputation over thirty-six years in the US Senate as someone who could work across the aisle. I had done the same things as vice president. When President Obama needed someone to deal with the Congress to keep the government open, he would send me. Three times. In one memorable example, in late December 2012, a combination of an expiring tax law and the beginning of automatic budget reductions meant that $500 billion in tax hikes and spending cuts would slam America's economy if some solution wasn't found. Federal Reserve Chair Ben Bernanke described this as a "fiscal cliff." Majority Leader Mitch McConnell went to the Senate floor and announced that he was going to call Vice President Biden to jump-start negotiations. When he did call, he said: "Does anyone down there know how to do a deal?" Over the next thirty-six hours, the two of us did just that.

A key part of working with Congress was showing respect. I wanted to make sure my White House was communicative and responsive to all members. Louisa Terrell structured my Office of Legislative Affairs to understand the diverse needs of various congressional constituencies. We had team members assigned to the progressive caucus members, to the moderates, to the front liners (those representing competitive or even Republican-leaning districts), to the Congressional Black Caucus and Congressional Hispanic Caucus and Congressional Asian Pacific American Caucus (In March, I would choose as my budget director Shalanda Young, who had earned praise from Republicans. As Senator Lindsey Graham said in one of Shalanda's confirmation hearings, "Everybody who deals with you on our side has nothing but good things to say."[8] That sort of respect mattered to me.)

There is a short grace period for any incoming president while the people wait to see if he'll actually do what he said he would do. I knew that if I could address the pandemic, and get emergency funding to families, we could begin to heal. Those successes would become the foundation for others. It would be hard, but as Lyndon Johnson



9780316598484_PromiseMeAmerica_int_1P.indd 78 7/17/26 1:51 PM

once said, "What the hell is the presidency for?"[9] That is why we elect presidents — to get the big jobs done.

My preference was to pass the American Rescue Plan as a bipartisan bill. At the end of January, I brought a group of Republican members to the White House and made a good-faith effort to reach a bipartisan agreement.

That meeting made it clear that what our Republican colleagues were willing to support wasn't up to the task we faced of getting the economy moving, keeping small businesses from closing their doors, and keeping families fed and in their homes. It wasn't contentious, but they felt that they had passed a stimulus bill that December and wanted this one to focus on COVID, and therefore didn't include elements like state and local aid. Nor was it clear there would be ten Republican votes for any bill at all. I hadn't given up on achieving bipartisan progress, and indeed I would have preferred not to have had a partisan bill as my administration's first legislative act, but the Rescue Plan had to pass, and pass quickly.

This meant the Rescue Plan would require full Democratic support, which in turn meant making sure both Speaker Pelosi and Leader Schumer were on board with it. They were largely supportive of the bill from the start — after all, it had been built with many of the components their members wanted but hadn't succeeded in including in the last legislative effort. There were a few small issues to work out, but the larger concern came down to one person. The Rescue Plan would live or die on whether it got the support of Senator Joe Manchin, the famously independent former governor of West Virginia. Senator Manchin was considered the most conservative member of the Senate Democratic Caucus, and understandably so. Before entering public life, he had founded a coal brokerage company, which immediately put him at odds with some of the party's clean energy agenda.

He was a Democrat serving in a state where President Trump had just received nearly 70 percent of the vote. Part of his enduring



9780316598484_PromiseMeAmerica_int_1P.indd 79 7/17/26 1:51 PM

political success was due to the fact that he was a colorful character. In his office, he would serve moonshine. I never tasted it, but I heard it was strong stuff. When in Washington, he lived on his boat, which was named *Almost Heaven,* after a line in John Denver's song "Take Me Home, Country Roads." This allowed him to tell his constituents that he could pull up his anchor and sail away from the swamp of Washington anytime he needed to. In a Senate that was effectively fifty-fifty, Joe Manchin became the Senate's swing vote, and his role reminded me of a remark of John F. Kennedy's: "I never realized how powerful the Senate was until I left it and came up to this end of Pennsylvania Avenue."[10]

I had known Joe Manchin for a while — I sometimes called him Jo-Jo. I wanted to understand where he was on the Rescue Plan. I sent Brian Deese, Steve Ricchetti, and Louisa Terrell to meet with Manchin and Schumer, telling them to take whatever time was needed to walk through the proposal, line by line if needed.

Joe had reservations about its overall price tag, but his main concern centered on the potential for the misuse of funds. It was Senator Manchin's view that people would take any excess funds from extended unemployment insurance, and the child tax credit, and use that money irresponsibly — he was particularly worried about drugs. Time and again, I told him to please present me with evidence of that, because I would want to know. (After all, my job in overseeing the 2008 stimulus law was to root out waste, fraud, and abuse.) I had a different view. And my view was not that the American people were so flush or irresponsible that they'd go out and buy booze and drugs instead of baby food. It became a recurring area of disagreement. But Brian was successful in getting Senator Manchin to a grudging okay. He was also successful in building a relationship of trust with the senator that would prove important on later legislative efforts.

Senator Schumer brought the bill to the floor on March 4. For passage, it first had to clear several key procedural hurdles and then an amendment process known as a "vote-a-rama." Several efforts



9780316598484_PromiseMeAmerica_int_1P.indd 80 7/17/26 1:51 PM

were made to delay the bill as it trundled toward passage. For example, tradition dictates that a bill to be voted on be read, aloud, in full on the floor by the Senate clerk. In practice, as bills have become multi-thousand-page behemoths, senators often agree to skip the reading. In this case, Ron Johnson of Wisconsin objected to Senator Schumer's request to skip the reading, and votes were delayed for about ten hours as the entire 628-page bill was read aloud.

Then began the amendment process. Generally, once a bill is agreed to, which amendments will be offered and how senators will vote on them are agreed on too, so as not to throw any last-minute wrenches into something that has been delicately negotiated. Senator Sanders offered an amendment to increase the minimum wage, to show that progressives were still fighting for this shared goal. Then Tom Carper from my home state of Delaware offered an amendment on the time frame and dollar amount of unemployment insurance benefits, the very issue that had been carefully worked out with Senator Manchin. Voting stopped. Joe felt that the amendment didn't reflect what he'd agreed to. All of a sudden, the fate of the bill was in doubt, and a furious lobbying effort began.

I called Joe to meet with me in the Oval Office. We had always been nothing but civil. I had been patient and deferential. I understood where he was coming from, and he understood where I was coming from. We were both Catholic politicians from the old school. Proud. Stubborn. But now it was time to lay our cards on the table. This was my first major legislative initiative. The American people needed relief. I needed him on this vote. I never considered myself a Lyndon Johnson–type president, who cajoled and threatened and almost physically cowed legislators, but I was losing my temper. I told Joe that I needed him on this, and if he screwed me, I'd go to every county in West Virginia and tell them that Joe Manchin was why they weren't getting any help. Joe came right back at me, reminding me that I wasn't so popular in West Virginia. After a further exchange of words, Joe agreed to be with me and vote in favor.



9780316598484_PromiseMeAmerica_int_1P.indd 81 7/17/26 1:51 PM

Several folks on my team were frustrated about the holdup and wanted to call Manchin out about it. I've always been of the view that politics is a long game. There's nothing to be gained by spiking the ball or calling someone out. The thorn in your side on one day may be your most important ally the next, and Senator Manchin — I think he'd agree with this assessment — would prove to be both.

In the early hours of March 7, the bill passed the US Senate, with Vice President Harris casting the tiebreaking vote — the first in a record number of tiebreaking votes she would cast. It was one of the longest votes in modern Senate history. Speaker Pelosi, as she would do so many times and with such skill, delivered the necessary votes in the House on March 10. I signed it the next day.

Help was on the way.

As I would with future legislative efforts, I wanted someone trusted within my White House to keep track and coordinate how the law was being implemented. On this bill, I recruited Gene Sperling. Gene was the only person to have directed the National Economic Council under two presidents. At the outset, I told Gene that it was just accepted in Washington that cabinet secretaries had an adversarial relationship with their agency's inspector general, the independent watchdog responsible for investigating and preventing waste, fraud, and abuse. I told him that in my experience, it should be a cooperative relationship; my cabinet secretaries should want the expertise of the inspectors general. If something was wrong, or not being run effectively, I wanted to know it early so I could correct it.

Gene was indefatigable in putting the law to work, and he was successful. Some people would say we succeeded too well. Our critics would assert that the program I put in place overheated the economy and brought inflation to America. It was a narrative that stuck even though the evidence is clear now that the spending accounted for 1 or 1.5 percent of inflation when inflation was at its peak of 9 percent in 2022. Inflation was a worldwide phenomenon, driven by COVID and the disruption of supply chains and later Putin's invasion of Ukraine.



9780316598484_PromiseMeAmerica_int_1P.indd 82 7/17/26 1:51 PM

Partisan critics failed to mention that overwhelming bipartisan majorities in Congress had passed $3.4 trillion in pandemic relief—twice the size of the American Rescue Plan—before I took office.

The COVID relief and economic rescue package I put in place for the nation worked. The American Rescue Plan was designed to vaccinate the nation. It did that. The Commonwealth Fund estimated that we had saved over three million lives and reduced hospitalizations by over eighteen million people by the end of 2022.[11] The American Rescue Plan was designed to create jobs. It did that. By the time I left office, our economic recovery had created over sixteen million jobs. The American Rescue Plan was designed to feed Americans and make sure they could stay in their homes. And it did that. Millions of Americans weren't evicted, and eight million renters received emergency rent assistance. Millions of parents were able to feed their kids, and nearly forty million working families received child tax cut relief. All because of the American Rescue Plan.

CHAPTER FOUR

# TAKING ON TRICKLE-DOWN

Growing up in Scranton, you learn early in life the difference between working folks and wealthy folks. Class difference isn't something you read about. You live it — at school, at church, in Little League. You learn about it from your parents and your relatives when they sit around the family dining room table. Especially when the economy turns bad. You develop a sixth sense about people who look down on you. And it leaves a chip on your shoulder that you never lose. Even if you become president of the United States.

These are lessons instilled in you at an early age. After Mass on Sundays, our whole family would come over to our house for something to eat — but mostly to talk. The men and women would go into separate rooms. I would just hang around. Never talking. Just listening. One of the folks there was my grandfather, Ambrose Finnegan. I loved Grandpop Finnegan. And he loved to talk about Democratic politics and the working man. He used to say to me, "Joey, if you're lucky enough to be Irish, you're lucky enough."

One day, Grandpop Finnegan said, "Joey, you like Mr. Scranton, don't you?" He was referring to William Scranton, who would later be elected governor of Pennsylvania and who I viewed as the epitome of an upstanding citizen. And I said, "Yes, Grandpop." The Scrantons were the biggest name in town. They'd founded Scranton. And through the generations they had run the Lackawanna Iron and Coal Company and the Scranton Gas and Water Company. They had served in Congress and had been kingmakers in the Republican Party.

"Well, let me tell you about them," my grandpop continued. "Let's say one day you need a little help from Mr. Scranton. You work for him. And maybe you're hurt or you're a little behind on your rent. So you go to see him. And you walk up to his magnificent estate and knock on the door. His man Jeeves answers and lets you in and tells you to go into the 'sunroom.'

"You've never seen one of those. It's nice. Like everything in the house. And then after a while Mr. Scranton comes in and says, 'Hello, young man, what can I do for you?' And you tell him your problem. And he's polite and patient. Hears you out. And then says, 'Let me see what I can do about that.' And then he puts one hand around your shoulder. And smacks you on the back, like he's your best friend." At this point my grandpop would smack me on the back, for emphasis.

"And it's not until you're about a block or so from his house that you notice the feeling of warm blood running down your back. That, Joey, is what we call a silk stocking screw."

That's how my grandpop and many in his generation felt about the class divisions that were so palpable for anyone growing up in Scranton during and after the Great Depression. Wealthy people lived in the biggest houses and went to the best schools, generation after generation. Their needs were always addressed by a Republican Party that was all too happy to cater to them. Democrats, on the other hand, stuck up for the little guy. That basic difference — so clearly



9780316598484_PromiseMeAmerica_int_1P.indd 86 7/17/26 1:51 PM

on display throughout the 1930s and 1940s — was still understood viscerally in Pennsylvania well into the postwar era.

I certainly understood it, especially when it seemed like we were being led down a primrose path, back toward the old Republican policies of the 1920s. When I was a young senator, Ronald Reagan came to the presidency. And he brought with him a new economic theory: It was called supply-side economics. Critics labeled it, more accurately, "trickle-down economics." I knew another name for it, though. It was a "silk stocking screw." Because for forty years Republicans sold it to the working people of this nation as something that would be great for them. When in fact what it really did was make the wealthiest people in this country a whole lot richer. And screwed the working people of this nation. When I became president, I was determined to break the back of trickle-down economics in America.

I just never believed in trickle-down economics. The whole idea is premised on the notion that if you give rich folks and big corporations big tax breaks, it will make business and the country more profitable and more competitive and more successful. And all those benefits will "trickle down" — to working people. In the form of better-paying jobs. And more secure jobs. And better benefits. It's never worked. And even though it has been a demonstrable failure, every Republican president from Reagan on down — to Bush Senior, then Bush Junior, then Trump — keeps trying the same old failed policy. It's always the same. A Republican gets elected and they say the answer for the economy is another tax break for the rich. It doesn't matter what the problem is. The answer is always another tax break for the rich.

If you look at America's economy over the last forty-plus years, two things are true: The rich have gotten richer. And working people have fallen behind. That's the legacy of trickle-down economics. As any economist worth their salt can point out from the data, income inequality has skyrocketed since 1980. The top 20 percent have pulled away, dramatically, from the bottom 80 percent. And the top 1 percent



9780316598484_PromiseMeAmerica_int_1P.indd 87 7/17/26 1:51 PM

have pulled away, even more dramatically, from everybody else. Since the presidency of Ronald Reagan, the richest 1 percent have seen wage growth of 162 percent, and the richest 0.1 percent have seen wage growth of 301 percent.[1] That's not my idea of America.[2]

That's why in creating my entire economic program as president — from the American Rescue Plan to the Bipartisan Infrastructure Investment and Jobs Act to the CHIPS Act to the Inflation Reduction Act — I was guided by one fundamental principle: We're getting out of the business of giving tax breaks to rich folks and we're getting into the business of helping ordinary Americans get ahead.

I had always thought this way, since growing up in and among working families. My dad always taught me that a job was about much more than the income it created; it was about *dignity*. It was about self-respect, and a place in the community. It was about holding your head high.

He always worked hard to provide for us. But I still remember the feeling that a financial disaster might not be far away. No one worried about it more than he did. From the perspective of seventy years later, I just want to say: Thanks, Dad, you did great.

In keeping with this philosophy, I wanted labor to be front and center in my campaign and my presidency. This included leaders who I counted as close friends like Richard Trumka of the AFL-CIO (whom I would honor, posthumously, with a Presidential Medal of Freedom) and his successor, Liz Shuler; Lonnie Stephenson of the Electrical Workers; Sean McGarvey from the Building Trades; Douglas McCarron from the Carpenters; Harold Schaitberger from the Fire Fighters; Eric Dean from the Ironworkers; Lee Saunders from the Municipal Employees; Mary Kay Henry from the Service Employees; Terence O'Sullivan of the Laborers; Randi Weingarten of the American Federation of Teachers; and Becky Pringle of the National Education Association (of which Jill is a proud member).

And not just organized labor, who I made clear would be welcome at my White House, but all who worked for a living.



9780316598484_PromiseMeAmerica_int_1P.indd 88 7/17/26 1:51 PM

For secretary of labor, I couldn't have chosen a better champion than Marty Walsh, the former Boston mayor (or as he would have said, "may-ah"). Marty was a proud union man and had earned the trust of the nation's labor leaders. He was also way ahead of the curve in seeing the challenges that were coming (for example, robotics displacing workers), but also the opportunities that were coming with renewable energy, electric vehicles, and the millions of jobs we could create, simply by building all the components needed for this exciting new economy.

I was worried that the American Dream was slipping away from the great middle class, and I was determined to do all I could to shore it up. Instead of giving tax breaks to corporations, we would give tax credits to working families. We would invest in new industries that would create millions of new jobs. We would bring up the minimum wage, protect pensions, and support new training and education for workers. We would also make sure they had adequate health care. As I said many times, that is a right, not a privilege.

I was no rabble-rouser; this wasn't a zero-sum solution, with corporations and unions pitted against each other in lethal combat, like in the old days of the Gilded Age. It was all about thinking smart and urging both sides to work together, to adapt to rapidly changing conditions in the workplace, for the benefit of all. We had intense competition from China, and we were hemorrhaging jobs in manufacturing: We needed to train up, quickly. We needed nimble workers who were able to handle the newly developing technology, and an interconnected, global economy. We also needed to design a fairer tax system. I agreed with Warren Buffett when he said that he should not be paying a lower tax rate than his secretary.[3]

## A HUNDRED DAYS

I had inspiration as I built out these dreams for a better, fairer economy. I was encouraged not only by my hardworking team of advisers



9780316598484_PromiseMeAmerica_int_1P.indd 89 7/17/26 1:51 PM

but by a few friends who were looking down from the paintings I had hung around the Oval Office.

Every president gets to choose the art they want in their office, and it can be selected from the White House collection or arranged as a loan from the Smithsonian or, sometimes, from other museums or collections. When choosing the art I wanted in my Oval Office, I was less focused on specific pieces or specific artists and more interested in who was portrayed. My brother Jimmy and I consulted with Jon Meacham as I made my picks, and Ashley Williams and I chose their placements.

The Resolute Desk is the centerpiece of the Oval Office. This is the famous desk where the buck stops, according to Harry Truman. It has been around the world in every sense. Its timbers were once part of a British vessel, the HMS *Resolute*, the flagship of a scientific expedition exploring the Arctic in 1853. After getting trapped in ice, the ship was found by an American whaling vessel and returned to the British. Queen Victoria then regifted it, in a sense, presenting an elegant desk, made from the *Resolute*, to President Rutherford B. Hayes in 1880. So in its way, it is a monument to our alliances as well as to the spirit of exploration and science. Some of that spirit radiated from a painting of Benjamin Franklin I selected. I placed him near me, looking over my shoulder, to remind me of the importance of science as we fought COVID.

Across from me, facing the Resolute Desk, I put Franklin Roosevelt in the center of a cluster of five paintings, surrounded by George Washington, Abraham Lincoln, Alexander Hamilton, and Thomas Jefferson.[4]

It was appropriate to have FDR at the center. FDR had rescued the country by investing heavily in working families. He created millions of jobs, built up our infrastructure and defense capability by several orders of magnitude, and asked for higher tax rates from the wealthy to help pay their fair share. They hated him for it — and the



9780316598484_PromiseMeAmerica_int_1P.indd 90 7/17/26 1:51 PM

country thrived as it recovered from the Depression and built a much bigger and fairer economy.

Another reason I wanted to honor FDR was that he, too, had survived a rocky transition. Photographs from his inauguration show a disgruntled Herbert Hoover, scowling alongside his smiling successor. But at least Hoover had stayed to welcome FDR.

There was one more reason that the painting of Roosevelt was in the central position on the wall facing me. He was, in many ways, my road map. I admired his leadership style, which filled Americans with confidence that their president was doing everything humanly possible to bring relief.

In his inaugural address, he described a nation that was "stricken," and that word applied as much to a people struggling with a terrible pandemic as it had to those in the midst of the Great Depression. I felt that if we brought a laser focus to COVID, using all the resources of the federal government, we could get shots in arms and get the economy moving again. That's exactly what we did.

Ever since FDR's administration, the initial yardstick for presidential accomplishment has been the first one hundred days, and I also wanted to make significant progress within that window. Even with our razor-thin majority, we began to get huge and transformative bills through Congress. I remember nonstop meetings with my team as we worked around the clock to move our bills forward. We brought in congressional leaders from both parties to keep up the momentum. I often pointed out that we had a mission on the world stage as well. In a world in which China was ascendant and Russia was emboldened, we had to prove that democracies deliver for their people. For our people and, it is no exaggeration to say, for the future of democracy, we had to deliver.

People wanted relief. They were exhausted after four years of chaos, toxicity, and sickness. They wanted their lives back. We knew that millions of Americans without regard to party were behind us. If we could bring COVID under control and jump-start the economy,



9780316598484_PromiseMeAmerica_int_1P.indd 91 7/17/26 1:51 PM

we could right the ship of state. Then we could address all the other challenges our country faced.

In the same weeks that we were fighting against COVID, we were also tackling one of the worst side effects of the pandemic, the surge in unemployment and the blows to the economy from a year of sickness and fear. A week before my inauguration, the Labor Department tallied that there were almost a million (961,000) applications for unemployment benefits.[5]

The country was in shock, as it had been in 1933, and we had to reach people who needed our help the most, the working families of America. This would not be a "trickle-down" recovery. To push back against fear was a vital part of our work in 2021, and toward that end, my team and I held frequent press briefings.

As with our efforts to heal from COVID, we wanted the economic recovery to reach all Americans, regardless of their political affiliation or where they lived. We helped Black and Brown communities in urban areas as well as farm families in rural areas — not known for their likelihood to vote for me.

There was a lot of heavy lifting in the weeks that followed my inauguration. February was a whirlwind of talking, negotiating, and yes, some good old-fashioned arm-twisting. We knew we had the momentum of a fresh administration, and we did not want to see it dissipate in the halls of Congress.

The rescue plan I signed in March immediately galvanized the US economy. A year after I signed the American Rescue Plan, economists said that we had created 7.2 million jobs.[6] That too was a healthy shot in the arm — as it were — for our democracy.

By the time our administration had reached the hundred-day mark, we knew we were on the right path. So did the public — 59 percent liked what we were doing.[7]

Of course, we had many challenges ahead. Even with all of this progress, Americans were still dying from the virus. The card in my pocket reminded me of that daily.



9780316598484_PromiseMeAmerica_int_1P.indd 92 7/17/26 1:51 PM

## THE BIPARTISAN INFRASTRUCTURE ACT AND BUILD BACK BETTER

As I had said before my inauguration, I had a two-part plan: rescue, then recovery.

The American Rescue Plan addressed that first imperative.

Recovery was something we defined more broadly. I knew it wouldn't work for America simply to build back to where we had been before the pandemic hit. Even then, the burden on America's families had been crushing. During the campaign, my team had put together a broad and transformative agenda that we called our Build Back Better Plan.

It proposed free preschool for three- and four-year-olds, and two years of free community college. It called for capping the crushing cost of childcare and created a paid family and medical leave program.

The plan expanded tax cuts to make health care more affordable for the middle class and included a refundable child tax credit to continue the progress we had made in cutting child poverty.

The plan rewarded work, not wealth, closed tax loopholes for corporations, and gave the IRS resources to make the wealthy pay what they owed.

It also proposed long-overdue investments in jobs and infrastructure. It would dramatically improve transportation with funding for roads, bridges, ports, rail, public transit, and electric vehicles. It would remove lead pipes and provide clean drinking water, strengthen America's electrical grid, and deploy universal broadband, a utility now as important as water and power.

I asked Steve Ricchetti, Louisa Terrell, and our entire legislative affairs team to begin briefing the leaders — Democrats and Republicans — of the roughly half-dozen committees that had jurisdiction over these areas on the details of the plan. I enlisted my cabinet to do the same for the areas that would be administered by their agencies. I had my economic team working to explain how it was paid for, and



9780316598484_PromiseMeAmerica_int_1P.indd 93 7/17/26 1:51 PM

how much it would help the economy. Whereas reconciliation was a process that partially circumvented the committee chairs to handle issues related to the budget and taxes, and allowed the Senate to bypass the sixty-vote filibuster threshold and pass legislation with a simple majority, we wanted to see if there was a possibility that we could enact this package through what was called "regular order," honoring congressional prerogatives, letting them legislate, and, ideally, finding sixty votes to pass the bill on a bipartisan basis.

It was an all-out charm offensive. And the message that came back was clear: Congressional Republicans had no appetite for a bill of this magnitude. It would have to be broken apart. If we insisted on perfection, it might mean that we would end up with nothing.

If we split the Build Back Better agenda into two bills, it made sense that one would focus on jobs and infrastructure, and the other would focus on the elements of the caring economy. Mike Donilon christened these the American Jobs Plan and the American Families Plan.

I introduced these in relatively rapid succession. On March 31, 2021, at the Carpenters Pittsburgh Training Center, I announced the American Jobs Plan, explaining its historic and overdue investments and how it would benefit workers like the ones in the union hall with me.

A month later, on my ninety-ninth day in office, in my first address to a joint session of Congress, I unveiled the American Families Plan. Unlike in previous joint sessions of Congress when the hall had always been packed, I had the surreal experience of looking out at the House chamber and seeing fewer than two hundred lawmakers and other officials, neatly spaced out, masked, and socially distanced.

But that wasn't the history I was focused on. My remarks began with the traditional acknowledgment of the two people sitting behind me:

> Madam Speaker, Madam Vice President. No president has ever said those words from this podium…and it's about time.



9780316598484_PromiseMeAmerica_int_1P.indd 94 7/17/26 1:51 PM

I updated the country on our progress in getting people vaccinated — 220 million shots into people's arms in one hundred days, more than double my ambitious promise — and I reminded the audience that everyone over the age of sixteen was now eligible to get vaccinated.

I reiterated my pitch for the American Jobs Plan and then turned to the issue at hand.

> To win that competition for the future, in my view, we also need to make a once-in-a-generation investment in our families and our children. That's why I'm introducing the American Families Plan tonight, which addresses four of the biggest challenges facing American families and, in turn, America.

I laid out the pillars of the plan: expanded access to free pre-K and community college, affordable childcare, paid medical leave, and tax relief and other savings for Americans.

When it came to the issue of our physical infrastructure, for as long as I could remember, politicians in Washington had talked about rebuilding America's infrastructure. In President Trump's first term, it had become a running joke. Every week was going to be infrastructure week. But it never happened. And as efforts languished, the need became more acute.

In 2019, a disturbing report from the World Economic Forum ranked America's infrastructure as only the thirteenth-best in the world, with the forty-eighth-best rail network. The US Chamber of Commerce — hardly a hotbed of radical progressivism — called the finding "disappointing on many fronts," because commerce so obviously depends on infrastructure, and the United States was once the envy of the world in this regard.[8]

As president, I realized that the situation was even more urgent than I had feared. Not since 2013 had there been any stand-alone



9780316598484_PromiseMeAmerica_int_1P.indd 95 7/17/26 1:51 PM

federal funding program for bridges.[9] As I was coming into office in 2021, the American Society of Civil Engineers gave America a grade of C minus for its infrastructure. In our country, the wealthiest on earth, 43 percent of our roads were in poor or mediocre condition. We suffered a water main break every two minutes, leading to a loss of six billion gallons of water every year. Out of more than 617,000 bridges, 42 percent were at least fifty years old; the average age grew a little more every year. A significant number, 7.5 percent (or 46,154), were structurally deficient. But Americans just kept driving across them. We were behind our competitors in other ways, with inconsistent broadband, slow trains, and a lackluster approach to the technologies of the future.[10]

COVID had concentrated my preexisting worries about our supply chains and the declining state of our highways, trains, ports, and airports. If we couldn't get vital supplies like medicine and masks to people who needed them, we were exposing ourselves to new dangers. Reconnecting Americans to one another, through the simple act of rebuilding our bridges and roads, just might bring us back together again.

Of equal importance, all the investments I laid out would mean jobs — huge numbers of new jobs. It was quite simply the most meaningful federal investment in jobs since World War II. It would put hundreds of thousands of skilled tradespeople to work laying miles of electrical grid and capping abandoned oil wells. The research funding alone would make America the global leader in emerging technologies such as batteries, biotech, and clean energy. It was also democratic, with a small *d*, in the way the money would be spent. We didn't care if it went to a blue or a red state; we wanted all Americans to benefit. As one example, I was excited about how transformative it would be for rural America to have access to high-speed internet. Taken together, the package was a once-in-a-generation investment, on a par with the Space Race of the 1960s.

In this infrastructure effort, I had some pretty good presidential precedent to follow. As a rising politician, Lincoln had always



9780316598484_PromiseMeAmerica_int_1P.indd 96 7/17/26 1:51 PM

championed "internal improvements" to tie the states together; then he authorized the transcontinental railroad while leading a huge war effort.[11] He was planning new railroads to connect the South to the North when he was assassinated.

In a similar way, Franklin Roosevelt was determined to bring the benefits of electricity to rural America. Wires, like train tracks, were another way to link Americans. Electric devices not only eased the crushing burden of labor (by allowing refrigeration, easier cooking and cleaning, and better lighting), they also helped Americans talk to each other.

There was another benefit: These investments had cemented America's global leadership. I knew that we could not remain a great nation if we became content with a second-rate infrastructure. I had learned that from my own experience as a commuter who traveled on Amtrak every day, for decades. But I also was paying close attention to a formidable competitor. China had been building some of the most remarkable bridges, roads, and tunnels in the world for decades. So important were these projects to the national identity that many Chinese people called their country by the nickname Infrastructure Maniac.[12]

There was plenty of justification for it. China had built hundreds of projects in foreign countries, where Chinese engineers were all too happy to construct large public works in return for raw materials, docking privileges, and economic subservience. It was all part of China's sprawling Belt and Road Initiative, an ambitious venture to create global supply systems for China's boundless appetites.

Many of China's most breathtaking bridges were being built at home, across river gorges or between islands like Macau, Hong Kong, and the mainland. There were national security reasons to link Hong Kong and Macau, formerly foreign colonies, to China. The bridges were yet another sign of China's remarkable determination to forge ahead, mastering every technology. (One bridge, between Hong Kong, Macau, and Zhuhai, resulted in four hundred new patents for the bridge builders.)[13]



9780316598484_PromiseMeAmerica_int_1P.indd 97 7/17/26 1:51 PM

Naturally, I thought: Why can't we do that? Once, we could. The idea for the Hong Kong–Zhuhai–Macau Bridge came from a Hong Kong businessman who admired the Chesapeake Bay Bridge-Tunnel, between Hampton Roads and the Delmarva Peninsula. He brought his idea back to Hong Kong, and suddenly it became a reality, on a scale far beyond the Chesapeake Bay Bridge-Tunnel.

What was more, we could undertake this new work while taking care to mitigate climate impacts, promote unions, and distribute economic benefits around the country, to red and blue states alike. We could fix some problems along the way, like the highways that plowed through and fractured tight-knit urban neighborhoods in the 1950s, or places of industrial pollution that had never been cleaned up.

We also made it a priority to go after lead pipes in homes and schools and day care centers all over America. Lead pipes have an incredibly damaging impact on brain development in children. America had millions of lead service lines that would need to be replaced.

By training workers in new technologies and investing heavily in research and development, we could help the United States return to its traditional position of leadership in science and technology and enjoy the prosperity that would follow. By making sure our roads, transit systems, and railroads were in good shape, we could help to get all Americans working again, including those without cars. Public transit was especially important to working-class Americans and the elderly.[14]

Instead of letting "infrastructure week" be a punch line, we could pass the biggest investment in America's roads and bridges and highways and ports since Dwight Eisenhower built the Interstate Highway System in America in the 1950s.

To get there, we had to bring some Republicans along.

---



9780316598484_PromiseMeAmerica_int_1P.indd 98 7/17/26 1:51 PM

Unlike with the American Rescue Plan, I was confident that I could get some Republican support for infrastructure. I thought it was important to pass a bipartisan agreement, not just try to shove big pieces of legislation down the other party's throat. That wouldn't be good for the country — and I wouldn't be able to get as much done. And there was no guarantee that would even work. I knew that with some key Democratic members, especially Senators Joe Manchin of West Virginia and Kyrsten Sinema of Arizona, a purely partisan approach would backfire. They would want to be part of bipartisan efforts, and I couldn't afford to alienate them by continually arm-twisting them to support single-party efforts. I would need them in the future, just as I had needed them to pass the American Rescue Plan.

With the blessing of the Democratic and Republican leaders in the Senate, we opened up negotiations with the two leaders of the Senate Committee on Environment and Public Works: Tom Carper of Delaware and Shelley Moore Capito of West Virginia, who was designated as the lead negotiator for the Republicans. It seemed that all roads to my legislative agenda were bound to run through West Virginia.

Having made the tough decision to split infrastructure from my other domestic priorities such as childcare, health care, and climate policy and proceed with infrastructure first, we soon realized that the process wasn't working. I held several meetings with Senators Carper and Capito, and we just weren't making progress. Senator Capito could not have been more professional. It was clear she was acting in good faith and wanted to get something accomplished, but what was also clear to me was that Senator McConnell, her leader, hadn't given her enough runway to negotiate something I considered serious. On June 8, I called Senator Capito and got directly to the point: I was ending the negotiations. To me, her response, both in private and in her public statement, spoke volumes. Disappointment, yes. But she took pains to say, "This does not mean bipartisanship isn't feasible."[15]



9780316598484_PromiseMeAmerica_int_1P.indd 99 7/17/26 1:51 PM

But was it? This was the topic of a meeting I'd had the day before, one that would turn out to be the most significant for the fate of my domestic agenda. A look at my schedule for June 6 provides a pretty typical day in the life of a president. That morning, I had a call with President Zelensky of Ukraine. In the afternoon, my secretary of defense, Lloyd Austin, joined me for a call with Jens Stoltenberg, the secretary-general of NATO. In the middle, I filmed several video messages to be played at events ranging from Pride Month celebrations to the Poor People's Campaign Summit.

Scheduled at 1:30 p.m. was a strategy meeting on the American Jobs Plan (which was effectively the infrastructure bill) and the American Families Plan (which included the other 'build back better" investments) that would lead to one of the least understood and most consequential decisions of my presidency.

In the meeting with me were Brian Deese, Mike Donilon, Anita Dunn, Ron Klain, Jen O'Malley Dillon, Bruce Reed, Steve Ricchetti, Susan Rice, Cedric Richmond, and Louisa Terrell. I was running late and they filed into my office closer to 2 p.m.

The bipartisan negotiations had reached an impasse: What was our path forward? The meeting played out much as I had expected. Many in the room felt that we should use the implosion of the negotiation as our cue to argue that we had tried a bipartisan approach and now we were going it alone. Steve and Louisa said that we should give a bipartisan approach one more chance. If I had put it to a vote, they would have been outvoted.

There was an interesting dynamic in many of our senior meetings. Ron was more pessimistic. In this case, he felt that another bipartisan attempt would look naive and result in nothing but wasted time and a battered reputation. He and the communications team thought that I was risking political capital, and perhaps my entire domestic agenda. Not only would I fail, I would look foolish — like Charlie Brown about to kick the football, only to see Lucy pull it away at the last second. This opinion was delivered with a warning: "We



9780316598484_PromiseMeAmerica_int_1P.indd 100 7/17/26 1:51 PM

have to rethink if we're going to let Congress define the success of your presidency."

Steve was more of an optimist. He thought there might be an opportunity to work with Senator Rob Portman of Ohio.

Something you learn very quickly as president is that you don't get the luxury of easy decisions. The easy decisions get made long before they reach your desk. And inevitably, any decision you make will upset someone. This is where experience matters. My gut, as well as my years of experience, told me that there were enough legislators who really wanted to get something done to make this work. I said I wanted to go the bipartisan route.

On June 8, we got our first indication that my faith in the US Senate might not have been misguided. That morning I met with Steve, Louisa, and Brian to map out how we'd get folks back to the table. I made calls to several key senators, and I received one important call — from Mitt Romney, the Republican senator from Utah. It is the mark of a decent and dedicated public servant that Mitt Romney, whom Barack and I had defeated to win reelection in 2012, was reaching out to ask me not to give up on a bipartisan approach. He pledged to work with me and my team. And he was true to his word.

With an ember of hope now burning, I boarded Air Force One for my first foreign trip as president, to the G7 summit in Cornwall, UK.

---

Our early outreach to Republicans — my call from Mitt Romney and Steve's with Senator Portman — had breathed life into our negotiations. Soon there was a group of principled Republicans who indicated a willingness to talk to us: Mitt Romney, Rob Portman, Bill Cassidy, Lisa Murkowski, and Susan Collins. They were joined by five senators on our side, as negotiating partners: Mark Warner, Joe Manchin, Jon Tester, Jeanne Shaheen, Kyrsten Sinema. They came to be known as the "Group of Ten."[16]



9780316598484_PromiseMeAmerica_int_1P.indd 101 7/17/26 1:51 PM

Steve and Brian began to meet regularly with the Group of Ten. It was a movable feast; sometimes they met in formal settings, in the Capitol or the White House. At other times, the gatherings were informal and social, like on Joe Manchin's boat. Now, the boat's name, *Almost Heaven*, drawn from the lyrics of the John Denver song, seemed auspicious. We had some country roads, and a lot more, to build.

As the talks continued, the provisions changed, with some new forms of infrastructure (such as broadband) added to what was originally a bill to upgrade roads and bridges. Some of our early ideas were altered or deleted, and some new ones were added. That's how the sausage gets made.

I was excited about broadband, which would have an especially big impact in both inner-city and rural America. High-speed internet is just as important today to homes and schools and small businesses as electricity was nearly a century ago in this country. It's just not possible to succeed in school or business without it.

Happily, these ten senators found enough common ground to sign off on it. The agreement provided $1.2 trillion in funding for hard infrastructure — bridges, roads, railroads, massive new investments in electric vehicles, water and sewage systems, broadband — spread out over eight years. There was also a provision that we use American supply chains and components as we rebuilt our systems.

On May 7, we received the jobs report from April, which showed that the economy had gained 266,000 jobs. Things were moving in the right direction, but in the previous two months, the economy had been creating an average of 500,000 jobs per month, so this felt like a setback. I spoke directly to the American people from the East Room about the work still to be done, particularly as it pertained to critical infrastructure. I had been in New Orleans the previous day, touring a nearly hundred-year-old water system that was in desperate need of upgrading, vulnerable to storms and flooding. Little did we know that we were about to experience a new threat to infrastructure.



9780316598484_PromiseMeAmerica_int_1P.indd 102 7/17/26 1:51 PM

That morning, Colonial Pipeline discovered a ransomware note on one of their business systems and reported it to the FBI as well as the Cybersecurity and Infrastructure Security Agency. Colonial Pipeline is really a jugular vein that brings gas and oil to the Northeastern United States; it comes up from Texas, crosses the Gulf States, and then travels through the Southeast and up to the Northeast. Even though the attack wasn't on actual pipeline function, Colonial shut down the pipeline, effectively halting nearly half of the East Coast's fuel supply. The attack is believed to have come from the DarkSide hacking group, operating out of eastern Europe or Russia.

I ordered a whole-of-government response, quarterbacked by Liz Sherwood-Randall, my homeland security adviser. This involved dispatching Anne Neuberger, who was serving as the first-ever deputy national security adviser for cyber and emerging technology, to begin working with the Colonial Pipeline leadership directly — we didn't want them to be alone in this.

We also brought in Jennifer Granholm, our secretary of energy, as the Department of Energy has jurisdiction over critical energy infrastructure. Pete Buttigieg, our secretary of transportation, needed to waive rules to allow more fuel trucks on the roads while the pipeline was down. Our team quickly devised contingency plans for what would happen if the pipeline wasn't brought back online; thankfully those never came into play.

As Colonial Pipeline negotiated a ransom, which they paid and some of which federal authorities were later able to help them recover, the pipeline remained shut down for six days, enough time for panic buying to cause fuel shortages in the Southeast and mid-Atlantic. Again, it was a timely and powerful reminder of the work that needed to be done to secure critical infrastructure against a full spectrum of threats, from a natural disaster to a physical attack to a cyberattack.

On May 12, the pipeline was restarted. That day, I issued an executive order demanding stronger software security standards for



9780316598484_PromiseMeAmerica_int_1P.indd 103 7/17/26 1:51 PM

anyone who was selling anything to the government, as well as a host of other cybersecurity requirements. The crisis had lasted less than a week, but the contours of this new threat — to our infrastructure and our nation — were clear. One analyst would later call it "a Pearl Harbor moment for cybersecurity."[17]

---

If the Colonial Pipeline hack had provided a galvanizing episode when it came to cybersecurity, the attacks of January 6 had done the same when it came to domestic extremism.

On my first full day in office, I had tasked the intelligence community with assembling a comprehensive domestic terrorism threat assessment.

An area of particular concern to me was the military. The vast majority of America's men and women in uniform bring honor to that uniform and serve with integrity. However, several of the extremists who stormed the US Capitol on January 6 were active-duty members of the military, and others were veterans. It was clear that we had to get a grip on the problem of domestic extremism in America, and extremism within the ranks of the military in particular, as these were the people with the skills and training to effectively commit violence.

Two weeks after I requested that assessment, Secretary of Defense Lloyd Austin and General Mark Milley, the chair of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, ordered a military "stand-down" — a sixty-day period for every unit in the military to focus on domestic extremism within the ranks and receive appropriate training. A particular area of interest was the period of time when people are transitioning out of the military and are seeking a new sense of purpose. The stand-down was yet another reminder for me of why Secretary Austin was the right man for the job. Not only was he the first African American general officer to lead an army corps in combat and the first African American to command an entire theater of war, he was also a statesman. When he was



9780316598484_PromiseMeAmerica_int_1P.indd 104 7/17/26 1:51 PM

a lieutenant colonel in the Eighty-Second Airborne Division, they had dealt with domestic extremism in their ranks — a band of neo-Nazi skinheads who committed two racially motivated murders in North Carolina — and as a result he had experience in showing commanders what they had to look for and protect against in their ranks.

The day fuel started flowing again through the Colonial Pipeline was the same day I announced from the Rose Garden that fully vaccinated Americans could take off their masks. I went directly from that announcement to another meeting, this one in the Situation Room with my entire national security team. Even though they had watched my Rose Garden remarks on closed-circuit monitors, they remained masked until Vice President Harris walked in and said something to the effect of, "Didn't you clowns hear, you can take your masks off?" Everyone was still chuckling when I walked in.

Then we got down to business, a conversation about the national strategy to counter domestic terrorism. Each participant walked me through their piece of it and how it would be implemented. It was yet another whole-of-government undertaking, as Secretary Austin, Deputy National Security Advisers Jon Finer and Josh Geltzer, Director of National Intelligence Avril Haines, Attorney General Merrick Garland, Secretary of Homeland Security Alejandro Mayorkas, National Security Adviser to the Vice President Nancy McEldowney, White House Counsel Dana Remus, National Security Adviser Jake Sullivan, Homeland Security Adviser Liz Sherwood-Randall, and FBI Director Chris Wray each were in the meeting and had a role to play. I pressed them on particulars of the plan and then asked them for various revisions, which took several weeks to finalize. Once we agreed on the strategy and implementation, I asked Attorney General Garland to make it public, which he did in a speech in the Great Hall of the Department of Justice a month later. His message was clear: "The two most lethal elements of the domestic violence extremist threat are 'racially or ethnically motivated violent extremists, and militia violent extremists.'"[18] He was also clear that our response would be focused

on violence, not ideology. In America, even ideologies we find abhorrent are protected under the First Amendment. But when those ideologies tip into violence or criminal behavior, as they increasingly were, it is law enforcement's job to act.

---

As we hit mid-June, even the Group of Ten negotiations were growing unwieldy. So the group decided to turn it over to two people, Senator Rob Portman representing the Republicans and Steve Ricchetti for the Democrats, to negotiate the last details of the bill. They did so, hashing out details, often with Brian Deese in the room to provide real-time economic analysis.

That's how politics used to work in Washington, with trust, patriotism, and the implicit confidence that we can talk to each other. It was working again. We resurrected a nearly forgotten adjective and called it the Bipartisan Infrastructure Act.[19]

By June 24, we were ready to announce a deal. And early that morning, we received another reminder of the costs of deteriorating infrastructure. Shortly after 1 a.m. on June 24, a large condominium tower in Surfside, Florida, near Miami, collapsed. It was clear that the loss of life would be significant, and it was.

I quickly approved an emergency declaration, which gave FEMA the authority to support search, rescue, and recovery efforts. I approved federal support for investigation into the causes. I also called Florida's governor, Ron DeSantis, to offer whatever additional help he needed.

At the time, Governor DeSantis was the darling of the MAGA movement. He had been fighting our efforts on COVID response, had railed against the American Rescue Plan, and was seen as a potential political heir to President Trump.

If there's the slimmest of silver linings to be taken from times of tragedy, it's that they strip away unimportant divisions and



9780316598484_PromiseMeAmerica_int_1P.indd 106 7/17/26 1:51 PM

distinctions in the face of shared sacrifice and shared loss. Ninety-eight people had died in the collapse, making it one of the deadliest structural failures in US history. Among the lost were elderly couples and young children. That complex of towers was home to Latin American immigrants, Puerto Ricans, and retirees from the Northeast. Particularly hard hit was the Orthodox Jewish community, which is concentrated in Surfside; many of the victims were part of that community.

In my conversations with Governor DeSantis and the mayor of Surfside, I said that I'd like to visit, and we planned a trip for several days later, when the logistics of my arrival wouldn't interfere with the recovery effort.

When I did visit, we first received a briefing at the incident command center. Governor DeSantis and I sat next to each other. Reporters who were looking or even hoping for some sort of political stare-down were disappointed. Governor DeSantis thanked me for recognizing the severity of the tragedy from the outset, and I put my hand on his arm and pledged that the federal government would cover 100 percent of the costs associated with Florida's emergency response. For a too-brief moment, we weren't Democrats or Republicans; as I said at the time, we were "just people wanting to do the right thing for their fellow Americans."[20]

We then stopped to thank the first responders before heading into a closed-door meeting with the families of the victims. I've visited enough disasters to know that sometimes you see people who are stunned, with a flat affect and thousand-mile stares. Sometimes there are tears and grief. And sometimes it's just plain gratitude that someone sees them and is there for them. That's what I felt in Surfside. Each family was clustered around a table, and we began going table to table, making time to share a hug, a remembrance, a brief conversation with anyone who wanted one. I told them of the grief I had experienced, and warned them that there might be a moment in the weeks ahead, after the television cameras left and the well-wishers stopped coming and the makeshift memorial was



9780316598484_PromiseMeAmerica_int_1P.indd 107 7/17/26 1:51 PM

taken down, when the enormity of the loss would hit them. And I told them that if they could push through *that*, there would come a moment when the loss of their loved one would bring a smile to their lips rather than a tear to their eye. I was there, and I wanted to make sure that anyone who wanted to talk to me had the opportunity to do so.

---

Back in Washington, we needed to settle a few last details to get the infrastructure bill across the finish line, with a vote. The Senate minority leader, Mitch McConnell, needed to be reassured by his Republican colleagues in the Group of Ten that the negotiations had been principled and that each side had built trust in the other. And toward that end, the Group of Ten asked me for an important promise, that I would not change the numbers we had negotiated, through reconciliation or any of the other ways a president can put his thumb on the scale. I gave my solemn word (or as I often said, "my word as a Biden"). Mitt Romney later said that without my pledge, the bill would have been "dead in the water."[21]

Even with all of these mutual reassurances, there was still some anxiety as the bill went before Congress, but it passed the Senate on August 10.

The House would be trickier.

To pass the Bipartisan Infrastructure Act, I had to navigate some strong feelings among the more progressive members of the Democratic Party, who feared that if we passed the infrastructure bill first, Congress might never get around to the care agenda or the climate investments. Indeed, it was the protracted negotiations to get progressives on board that resulted in a long lag between Senate and House passage of the bill.

I understood — and I appreciated their passion and shared their goals. But as I saw it, the choice was between getting nothing at all and



9780316598484_PromiseMeAmerica_int_1P.indd 108 7/17/26 1:51 PM

at least having the chance to finally make an investment in America's infrastructure that should have been made forty years ago.

The House vote on the bill was scheduled for November 5. That morning, we received another robust jobs report: 531,000 new jobs and unemployment at its lowest rate since the pandemic began. I called it another great day for our economic recovery, which was turning out to be faster, stronger, and fairer than anyone could have predicted.

As an indication of the daily whiplash of the presidency, I went from a jubilant jobs report announcement to a somber event: the funeral service for former Secretary of State Colin Powell. Secretary Powell and I had a three-decade-long friendship. We even once participated in a friendly drag race in our Corvettes for the TV show *Jay Leno's Garage*. My 1967 Stingray edged out Powell's 2015 model. Colin Powell was a man of his word, and a patriot of unmatched honor and dignity. Even when we disagreed, we did so with respect. I was proud to be his friend, and deeply moved when he crossed party lines to endorse me in 2020.

After the funeral, I returned to the White House to make a final push for House passage of the infrastructure law. From 3 p.m. until nearly midnight, my team and I made a series of phone calls to coordinate with Nancy Pelosi, Jim Clyburn, and, importantly, Congresswoman Pramila Jayapal, who led the Congressional Progressive Caucus, the group of roughly ninety members who were most frustrated with the decision to move infrastructure before the childcare, eldercare, health care, and climate investments.

In the Treaty Room, I was joined by Ron Klain, Brian Deese, Steve Ricchetti, Susan Rice, and Louisa Terrell. It had the feeling of an old-fashioned political phone bank. We had pizza brought in as we split up calls, checked the pulse on wavering members, and pushed for the votes we needed. The House began voting shortly before 11:30 p.m. By 11:40 I was able to call Speaker Pelosi and thank her for her amazing work. The bill had passed 228–206. Six Democrats had voted against it, but thirteen Republicans had voted for it.



9780316598484_PromiseMeAmerica_int_1P.indd 109 7/17/26 1:51 PM

After the vote, I also called Pramila Jayapal's mother, in India, to tell her what a key role her daughter had played in this legislation. When the call became public, Pramila pointed out that the call wasn't a bribe; I made it after the vote had already taken place!

Then I got cleaned up, thinking I would make a statement. I put on a shirt and a blazer and came back down to the Treaty Room, where I was confronted by Susan Rice. It wasn't an issue of policy, though; she was upset that I was wearing loafers without socks. I felt that a casual look was okay for a midnight statement. She pointed out that she had seen the uproar it caused when Barack Obama had worn a tan suit. It became a moot point when I decided we could celebrate the bill's passage the next day.

---

I signed the infrastructure bill into law on November 15 in an event on the South Lawn. As part of my remarks, I shared that I had asked Mitch Landrieu, the former mayor of New Orleans, to oversee the implementation, making sure every penny was spent where it was supposed to be spent.

The Landrieus and Bidens had been close for some time. Mitch's father, Moon Landrieu, had been mayor of New Orleans, and basically told my daughter Ashley that she had to attend Tulane University, which she did. Mitch's sister, Mary, and I had served in the Senate together. Visits I had made to New Orleans after Hurricanes Katrina and Rita helped advance my thinking, not only about how to respond to disasters but also about how to rebuild.

I particularly admired how, when Mitch was mayor of New Orleans, he had deftly handled the removal of four Confederate monuments amid the city's reckoning with its own history. In his words announcing the removal of the statues, he said, "We as a people are able to acknowledge, to understand, to reconcile, and more importantly, choose a better future for ourselves, making straight what has



9780316598484_PromiseMeAmerica_int_1P.indd 110 7/17/26 1:51 PM

been crooked and making right what was wrong."[22] It seemed a perfect encapsulation of so much of the work I was trying to do, through the infrastructure law and so much else.

I told Mitch that whatever he needed to do to make this law work, he had my full authority to do. Mitch led the rebuilding effort efficiently and admirably. By the time I left office, seventy-three thousand projects were underway all across America, with many more still to come.

Again, many of these pieces of legislation were so comprehensive that even components that were less understood had major impacts in communities across America. One that was particularly important to me in the infrastructure law addressed what are called "off-system" bridges. Our law contained the single-largest dedicated investment in bridges since the construction of the Interstate Highway System back in the 1950s and 1960s. However, most of the forty-five thousand bridges in America that were in poor condition were not part of the federal highway system. In fact, shortly after signing the law, I traveled to Woodstock, New Hampshire, to visit a bridge spanning the Pemigewasset River. The bridge had been on New Hampshire's "red list" for nearly a decade by the time of my visit — it was considered structurally deficient. The weight of the trucks that could cross it had been reduced, which meant that local farmers and businesses trying to move their products either had to move less of them or else had to take a ten-mile detour. In some places, failing bridges meant that fire trucks were too heavy to cross, the detours costing time and potentially lives. Usually, federal funds can be used to repair bridges like that only if the states or localities pay for half the cost, which many can't afford.

Our law allowed the federal government to cover 100 percent of the cost, which meant that more small communities could be more easily connected to markets for their products, or gain access to the jobs and services that would improve their lives. The law is building bridges in every sense of the word.

The bill was historic on so many levels — the investment not just in roads and bridges, ports and airports, but also in rail and public



9780316598484_PromiseMeAmerica_int_1P.indd 111 7/17/26 1:51 PM

transit, clean water, energy and climate resilience — deeply necessary and long overdue. It quickly proved to be so popular that many Republicans who voted against it later took credit for all the ways in which it reshaped their home districts. (Much as we had when members who voted against the American Rescue Plan took credit for its benefits, we referred to these members as the ones who "voted no, took the dough.") Just over a year later, I stood on the banks of the Ohio River with leaders from both sides of the river and both sides of the aisle — Republican Senate Minority Leader Mitch McConnell and Democratic Governor Andy Beshear of Kentucky; and Republican Governor Mike DeWine, Republican Senator Rob Portman, and Democratic Senator Sherrod Brown of Ohio — to announce a $1.4 billion award to build a new Brent Spence Bridge to relieve one of the busiest freight corridors in the country. There was enough good cheer to go around, and I was happy to share the credit. It felt like we were getting back to normal. Not only were we getting concrete benefits to Americans; we were proving that the best way to lift an economy is to just ignore trickle-down completely. I like to think that Grandpop Finnegan would have approved.



9780316598484_PromiseMeAmerica_int_1P.indd 112 7/17/26 1:51 PM

CHAPTER FIVE

# AMERICA'S BACK

FOUR YEARS OF "AMERICA FIRST" IN THE PREVIOUS ADMINISTRATION had left many of America's allies scratching their heads about whether we still stood with them.

Answering that question was important to me.

The quickest way to answer it was by working to end a global pandemic. And the way to do *that* was to mobilize immense resources. In World War II, the United States had become the "arsenal of democracy," in Franklin Roosevelt's famous phrase. Now we would become the arsenal of vaccines.

My first priority, of course, was making sure that Americans were safe from COVID. But I was also aware of America's moral responsibility to lead the world, and to share the vaccine, the lifesaving result of America's ingenuity. Even before my inauguration, during the transition, I was grilling my team about what our immense resources would make possible. Could we send one hundred million vaccines around the world? Five hundred million? A billion? And could we distribute them to these countries for free?



9780316598484_PromiseMeAmerica_int_1P.indd 113 7/17/26 1:51 PM

It would require an immense effort, coordinating with drug manufacturers, strengthening supply chains, working with regulators and foreign governments. All at a time when people were still deeply worried about the virus and still avoiding face-to-face meetings. I told my team to get it done, and to bring me any challenge where they needed me to make a call, break a logjam, or twist an arm.

There was no playbook; we were inventing this as we went along. No health intervention on this scale had ever been done. Every aspect of the challenge was complicated. But we pressed the point with everyone we could. Pfizer was on board from the beginning, and I want to thank its CEO, Albert Bourla, for understanding the gravity of the situation — and for being willing to work with us to create the vaccines at cost (Moderna was harder to persuade). Albert understood that we needed both scale and speed. He stood shoulder to shoulder with us.

On April 19, 2021, we announced that everyone sixteen or older in the United States would be eligible for a free vaccine. No one in this country who wanted a vaccine would be denied one. A week later, on April 27, we declared our intention to ship sixty million vaccines to other nations. On June 3, we started distributing them.

By the spring of 2022 we had sent half a billion vaccines to 114 nations. By 2024 it would be seven hundred million. Every leader I talked to, in every setting, expressed gratitude. We had done it for humanitarian reasons, not self-interest. But it had the added benefit of restoring some luster to America's reputation. We took care to send vaccines to places where they were needed the most. Just as every delivery of food or medicine made by USAID had on its packaging the words "From the American People," every shipment of vaccines we sent had a small American flag on it.

That was an important corrective to a narrative that China had been promoting since the beginning of the pandemic; namely, that authoritarian states were better than democracies at protecting their populations. To their way of thinking, the very openness of



9780316598484_PromiseMeAmerica_int_1P.indd 114 7/17/26 1:51 PM

Western societies made them susceptible to health crises and other problems.

I was determined to show the world that there is no limit to what Americans are capable of when we put aside our political differences and work toward a common cause. The early months of 2021 bore out that theory. As we started to turn the economy around and get the pandemic under control, we could return to the world stage with renewed confidence and lead from a position of strength.

In my inaugural address, I had promised that we would celebrate and honor "the cause of democracy." That was no platitude. It was a strategic goal of great consequence. It meant deepening our commitments to our allies and reminding the world that open societies can solve problems more effectively than closed ones. It meant, in particular, that we would trust our own people again.

Democracy had been under siege before, notably in the early 1930s, when the Great Depression weakened the argument that open societies create prosperity and a rising number of critics, both within and without the country, were contending that autocracy was the wave of the future. Adolf Hitler became Germany's chancellor on January 30, 1933, five weeks before Franklin D. Roosevelt was inaugurated. Even as he was managing World War II, FDR was thinking ahead, toward a future he wouldn't live to see. He envisioned a web of alliances that would make the United States unassailable, in a world of expanding democracies, naturally aligned. Of course, there would still be oppressive regimes, but thanks to the United Nations — conceived largely by FDR — they would be at a disadvantage in a world assembly that sought the open and truthful discussion of issues. We would always have adversaries, but thanks to NATO, we would never have to fight alone.

The result of his efforts was a complex, interlocking architecture built atop a well-laid foundation of military strength, economic vitality, and time-tested values. It included a new alliance, NATO, a Marshall Plan to rebuild a shattered Europe, and generous foreign



9780316598484_PromiseMeAmerica_int_1P.indd 115 7/17/26 1:51 PM

aid to our friends. It supported a world organization, the United Nations, designed to prevent wars of the future and to fight poverty, disease, and other curses on humanity. It was an achievement worthy of the painful sacrifices of World War II. In his memoir, Secretary of State Dean Acheson compared it to "the Creation." It was all the more impressive because of the adversity the builders faced in a world still full of suspicion and reeling from war, famine, disease, and the Holocaust. Remarkably, two of our strongest allies to emerge from the war were our former enemies, Germany and Japan. That was a measure of how much the world trusted the United States to do the right thing.

Patiently, year by year, Democratic and Republican presidents improved upon these structures to maintain American leadership. In countless arenas ranging from international trade to aviation to the freedom of the seas, the world looked to America to maintain a system that worked. Public health standards, food safety, disaster relief, the protection of refugees, scientific efforts to understand climate change — all were strengthened by international engagement.

The results were plain to see. Since 1945, the world has seen astonishing, consistent economic growth (averaging almost 3.5 percent a year), with approximately four billion people lifted from poverty. The number of democracies exploded, from around a dozen to eighty-seven, according to one count.[1] Of course, we still saw the same problems the world has always known — devastating genocides, pandemics, and regional wars. But for eight decades and counting, we saw no large-scale wars between great powers. That is a remarkable accomplishment, with no precedent in the long sweep of human history. It is often called the "Pax Americana," in tribute to the nation that built it, painstakingly.

But we should never take our inheritance for granted. Decades of success can easily bring complacency, and a sense that America's privileged position in the world is a part of the natural order. But it isn't. That position can be lost, in ways large and small.



9780316598484_PromiseMeAmerica_int_1P.indd 116 7/17/26 1:51 PM

The minute he took office in 2017, Trump and his administration embraced historical adversaries like Russia, disdained allies, and refused to abide by the rules—including the rules for democratic elections, written out carefully by the founders. If we didn't follow our own rules, why should anyone else?

That was hard on our friends, and on all the nations struggling to strengthen their own democracies. A number of watchdogs noted that the number of democracies had declined between 2017 and 2021, and that American influence had declined as well.[2] That was certainly true in Europe, where President Trump missed an important opportunity to honor the Americans who had fallen in France, on the one hundredth anniversary of World War I (he called them "losers").[3] NATO meetings, usually a time for close allies to coordinate military strategy, were now tempestuous, and at several moments, President Trump threatened to withdraw from an alliance that we had created, for our own benefit. As US Admiral James Stavridis, the former supreme allied commander of NATO, said, "Even discussing the idea of leaving NATO—let alone actually doing so—would be the gift of the century for Putin."[4]

Thanks to the vigilance of earlier presidents, the threat of nuclear war had receded from its high-water mark, the Cuban Missile Crisis of October 1962. But there were still grave threats to American leadership, particularly from China and Russia. Given these choppy waters, I was glad to be steering the ship of state.

Now I wanted to begin a crucial, strategic reset of our foreign relations. We had lost ground, with a lot of unforced errors. We had pulled out of treaties that made our allies safer—like an agreement with Iran to dismantle its nuclear program—for no clear reason. We had withdrawn from the Paris Climate Agreement, and from the Open Skies Treaty, which had originally been proposed by one Republican, Dwight D. Eisenhower, and signed into law by another, George H. W. Bush. To me, the full list of withdrawals signaled, in a word, retreat. "Retreat" is not a word to build a presidency around.



9780316598484_PromiseMeAmerica_int_1P.indd 117 7/17/26 1:51 PM

Now it was time to strengthen our alliances, reassert America's democratic values, and bring our friends back inside a big tent. Among other positive results, it would show Russia and China that we were not in decline, despite frequent Chinese predictions to that effect.

So in the early weeks of my administration, I worked the phones, calling my counterparts. To an extent, these were business calls — I wanted to share my thinking on the investments I planned to make in America's domestic renewal and the progress we could all deliver for our citizens if we worked together in common purpose. I also wanted to let them know we would be rejoining the international organizations and treaties that the Trump administration had walked away from. Just as important, these were calls between friends. In many cases, these were leaders I knew, like Germany's Angela Merkel, for example, whom I had met on numerous occasions as vice president. Even when I didn't have a relationship, I wanted to get to know them, to hear their concerns.

These conversations were invaluable, as a way to clear the air and announce our return to the world community. For some leaders, that couldn't come soon enough. Even as she neared retirement in her sixteenth and final year in office, Angela Merkel was a towering figure in Europe — so much so that people had begun to call her "the leader of the free world," in the absence of any meaningful commitment from the United States to the international organizations it had once led.[5] In our conversations and later in her memoir, Angela was candid about her frustrations with my predecessor, who refused to shake her hand, and who seemed "emotional" in their meetings, driven by grievances rather than facts. She also wondered why he was "fascinated" by Vladimir Putin and other politicians "with autocratic and dictatorial traits."[6]

That was a mystery I could not unravel. But I knew it was important to shore up our alliances. On point after point, I found solidarity. Our allies wanted to work on the same things I did — recovering from the pandemic, rebuilding prosperity, expanding trade, modernizing infrastructure, and mitigating the worst effects of climate



9780316598484_PromiseMeAmerica_int_1P.indd 118 7/17/26 1:51 PM

change. That included managing the exciting opportunities that were being created by the transition to renewable energy. All of those goals would be reached more quickly if we worked together. And solving an international problem like climate change would obviously require an international solution.

But there were anxieties too. From many of these calls, I got a sense of rising unease about Vladimir Putin, whose sullen mood swings were well known to Europe's leaders.

In 1997, Russia had been invited to join the G7, an organization of seven allied democracies, by then-President Bill Clinton, in a time of great hope for Russia's democratic future, when Boris Yeltsin was trying to orient Russia more toward the West. But since then, hopes had gradually given way to skepticism, as Putin shredded democratic institutions, jailed and killed opposition leaders, and became a dictator for life. A series of internal maneuvers in 2020 had given him the right to lead Russia until 2036 and weakened the ability of any of Russia's domestic institutions, like the courts, to restrain him. Russia's economy, like its politics, was hopelessly corrupt.[7]

After its illegal annexation of Ukraine's Crimean Peninsula in 2014, Russia had been ejected from the G8 (which then became the G7 again). Since then, Putin had continued to daydream about restoring the boundaries of a vaguely defined "historical Russia," to correct the dissolution of the Soviet Union, which he called "the greatest geopolitical catastrophe of the century."[8] There was a sense among European leaders — confirmed by my own intelligence briefings — that Putin was preparing a new military adventure.

That was obviously a matter of grave concern, given the historical importance of our trans-Atlantic partnerships, long memories of the Cold War, and even older memories of the two world wars born out of vague grievances, originating in the borderlands between Central Europe and the Russian steppes.

Our other Cold War adversary, China, was arguably an even greater threat. We could not look the other way as a rising China



9780316598484_PromiseMeAmerica_int_1P.indd 119 7/17/26 1:51 PM

bullied its neighbors, interrupted the freedom of the seas, and suppressed democracy wherever it could—particularly in Hong Kong, the semi-independent territory whose democratic traditions China had promised to honor when Hong Kong reverted to Chinese rule after a century and a half of British control.

Given these broken promises, it was important to keep a close eye on the Taiwan Strait, where China had increased its threats to neighboring Taiwan, another friend and major trading partner of ours. Taiwan supplies more than 90 percent of the chips powering AI and other advanced technologies, and an invasion or blockade of the island would plunge the world into a second Great Depression. Through Congressional legislation and our own independent commitments, we have long promised to supply weapons to Taiwan that are defensive in character, while expressing our strong preference for peaceful resolution of differences between China and Taiwan. For decades, we've preserved "strategic ambiguity" about whether and under what conditions we might come to Taiwan's defense. The policy has worked: For more than four decades, we've avoided war, Taiwan has democratized, and it has become a major global economic force.[9]

China was in a resurgent mood in 2021, having outperformed the United States in an abortive trade war.[10] Throughout the previous four years, it had been pursuing its Belt and Road Initiative, building a vast network of trade and transportation to better connect China to the world's markets. By 2020, more than 130 nations had signed on, with a particularly heavy concentration in Africa.[11] Many commentators interpreted this as far more than an infrastructure initiative; it was an attempt to build a new political and economic order, emanating from Beijing.

As always, there was also a lot to worry about in the Middle East and the broader Muslim world. A civil war in Yemen was increasing regional tensions, and our diplomatic clout had been damaged by a number of missteps, such as the 2017 ban on immigration from six Muslim nations (including Yemen). Donald Trump's decision to rip



9780316598484_PromiseMeAmerica_int_1P.indd 120 7/17/26 1:51 PM

up the nuclear agreement that had been negotiated with Iran had led to a predictable response: Iran was dangerously ramping up its nuclear ambitions and stockpiles of uranium and causing trouble with proxy attacks on US forces. Saudi Arabia had badly strained its relations with the United States by ordering the 2018 murder of a Saudi journalist, Jamal Khashoggi, a US resident who wrote for *The Washington Post*.

From my long study of foreign relations, I was keenly aware of how quickly the world can intrude into the Oval Office. Some presidents seem better prepared than others. Most are elected because of campaign promises related to domestic policy issues — taxes, health care, or the general state of the economy. But then the world's reality intervenes. George W. Bush spent the first six months of his time in office focused on tax cuts, but his presidency changed forever on 9/11. Adaptability seems to be a key to successful presidencies. John F. Kennedy, who came into office as a Cold Warrior, prepared to "bear any burden," as he said in his inaugural address, acted aggressively in Cuba (where he approved the disastrous Bay of Pigs operation) and in Vietnam (where he increased our military footprint). But the Cuban Missile Crisis changed him, and he emerged as a proponent of peaceful negotiation with the Soviet Union (and specifically of a moratorium on nuclear testing) in his final year in office. Similarly, Ronald Reagan began his presidency with gaffes about bombing the Soviet Union but ended it as a serious negotiating partner with Mikhail Gorbachev. Together, they made great progress in a summit at Reykjavik in 1986 and signed an important arms control treaty in 1987. This treaty did considerable good, lowering tensions between the world's two largest nuclear arsenals, until the Trump administration withdrew from it in 2018.

I was neither a hawk nor a dove; I was my own man, having thought about America's place in the world for a long time. I understood that a great power needed to defend its values and interests around the world. But I also knew that we had often weakened our standing with



9780316598484_PromiseMeAmerica_int_1P.indd 121 7/17/26 1:51 PM

ill-advised efforts that promised quick fixes to long-term problems — as we had seen in Iraq. I always wanted to protect the men and women we sent into harm's way, and to ensure that they were fighting with purpose, and well-defined goals. It had been a steep learning curve when I was sworn into the Senate, in 1973, at a time when the Vietnam War was winding down and a war was about to break out in the Middle East that would in turn lead to an Arab oil embargo, crippling our economy. Those were humbling lessons for a proud nation that had already lost some of its swagger in the Watergate era.

But I had seen us bounce back, time and time again. In the 1980s, there was a widespread fear that Japan, then the world's second-largest economy, would surpass us.[12] Instead, the opposite happened, as US GDP skyrocketed in the 1990s, and we became the world's sole superpower. That in turn led to a surge in global democracy, as nations around the world realized that they could enjoy prosperity, human rights, and democratic elections at the same time, and that we were a trustworthy partner toward these ends.

There were lessons to be learned from these historic shifts. It seemed to me that we were at our best when we explained, clearly and carefully, what our national interest was. During the Vietnam era, and again in Iraq, we had often failed to do that. In general, we wanted to promote steady democratic self-government, and because of our standing in the world, we were uniquely qualified to do that, through careful mediation and steady support for our friends. But history had also taught us to be vigilant when bad actors endangered their neighbors. Once we committed troops, we needed to give them all the tools that they needed to do their job. Then, once they came back home, we needed to honor them for their service (as we had not always done during the Vietnam era).

The German statesman Otto von Bismarck is alleged to have said, "God has a special providence for fools, drunks, and the United States of America."[13] I didn't know about the first two categories, but I did understand that we Americans occupied a special place in the world,



9780316598484_PromiseMeAmerica_int_1P.indd 122 7/17/26 1:51 PM

favored by geography and good fortune. To the east and west, we were protected by two great oceans. To the north and south, we were protected by two friendly nations, aligned with us in our vision and values. Fortified by these thoughts, I resolved to do all I could to help us return to our traditional place of leadership as the world continued its recovery.

## A VISIT TO STATE

I thought it was important to express these ideas publicly, and as soon as possible after I took office. With that end in mind, I ventured to Foggy Bottom, and to the Harry S. Truman Building, the home of the State Department, on February 4, 2021.

I wanted to make a gesture of respect and thank the men and women of the foreign service in person. They had endured four hard years under my predecessor, who often dismissed it as "the Deep State Department," and routinely ignored their expertise and sidelined their leadership. I wanted to boost morale. The men and women of State are the best of the best, representing America around the world with grace and professionalism. I had worked with my new secretary of state, Tony Blinken, for twenty years, and there was no one in Washington in whom I had more confidence. He had served on the staff of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee and then accompanied me into the Obama White House as my national security adviser. He served brilliantly in that capacity.

We had real work ahead of us. International confidence in the United States had plummeted as our foreign policy turned into something of a reality show, with high-profile events that produced no results, like the three telegenic meetings with North Korea's Kim Jong Un, which led to good TV ratings — and did nothing to prevent the increase in North Korea's nuclear capability.[14] Or the president's strange summit with Vladimir Putin in Helsinki, when Donald Trump meekly repeated Putin's casual assertion that Russia had not



9780316598484_PromiseMeAmerica_int_1P.indd 123 7/17/26 1:51 PM

interfered with the 2016 election (in contrast to abundant evidence from our intelligence community that it had). A leading Republican, my friend John McCain, called it "one of the most disgraceful performances by an American president in memory."[15]

I wanted to send a strong message to the State Department, and to the world beyond it. I would offer a consistent message to friend and foe alike. The speech I gave that day was like a family homecoming, and it felt appropriate to deliver it in a building named after Harry S. Truman, who did so much to prop up our alliances in the late 1940s, fulfilling FDR's vision. In my remarks, I thanked the men and women of the department for serving on the front lines of our diplomacy, and I outlined a strategic vision for the four years to come.[16]

I began with a message so central to my administration that I said it twice: "America's back." Then I added, "Diplomacy is back at the center of our foreign policy." I felt that they needed to hear it, directly from me. I mentioned my many conversations with allied leaders over the previous two weeks and announced my plan to repair our alliances, rebuilding muscles that had "atrophied over the past few years of neglect and, I would argue, abuse."

I wanted to be specific about our democratic values, which I defined as "defending freedom, championing opportunity, upholding universal rights, respecting the rule of law, and treating every person with dignity." That meant every person in the room, each of whom was a hardworking civil servant. It also meant all the people listening in other countries, entitled to rights and freedoms of their own.

But I wanted to avoid too celebratory a tone. We had real adversaries in the world, working to undermine these freedoms. I wanted to be precise about them, so I mentioned my intention to counter "the growing ambitions of China to rival the United States, and the determination of Russia to damage and disrupt our democracy."

I followed this shot across the bow with a few choice words to Vladimir Putin, promising that "the days of the United States rolling over in the face of Russia's aggressive actions — interfering with



9780316598484_PromiseMeAmerica_int_1P.indd 124 7/17/26 1:51 PM

our elections, cyberattacks, poisoning its citizens — are over." I also denounced "the politically motivated jailing of Alexei Navalny," because I felt that it was important to say that brave dissident's name prominently in my first foreign policy address.

In a different way, I also spoke to Xi Jinping. Here I adopted a measured tone, one that signaled our serious concern over China's human rights abuses and unfair economic practices, but I also expressed a desire to work with China when our values and interests aligned. We needed China's help fighting against climate change — they were the world's largest emitter of greenhouse gases, contributing close to a third of the planet's total. But they were also a signatory to the Paris Climate Agreement and were taking steps to reduce emissions. With a huge investment in solar panels, wind turbines, green hydrogen, geothermal energy, and EV batteries, they were key to the ongoing transition to renewable energy.[17]

In the same speech, I outlined climate as a major focus of my administration and announced plans for a climate summit on Earth Day. In other ways, too, I tried to signal that we were entering an exciting new time. In addition to the defeat of COVID — which we would accomplish with exactly the kind of international cooperation I was proposing — we would focus on growing threats, including a rise in cyberattacks. We would again lead with an enlightened science policy (I had already reversed Donald Trump's decision to withdraw from the World Health Organization). And true to our better angels, we would stand with our friends and allies in defense of core human rights.

In my inaugural address, I had claimed that America is an idea as well as a country. Franklin D. Roosevelt had said as much with his "four freedoms" — freedom of speech, freedom of religion, freedom from fear, and freedom from want — in his 1941 State of the Union address, articulated at a time when so many of the world's population lived without those freedoms. He in turn had looked to the founders as he sought to find a new language for human aspirations.



9780316598484_PromiseMeAmerica_int_1P.indd 125 7/17/26 1:51 PM

It was a comfort, giving this speech, to look over my shoulder and see a statue of Benjamin Franklin, attached to an elegant French clock, nearly as old as our alliance. The clock was a reminder to keep my remarks brief, but Franklin stood for something larger. In my office, his portrait served as a reminder of the importance of science to the founders. Here at State, he stood for the brilliant diplomacy that did so much to make the American idea possible at the start of our national experiment. Famously, he had called the new nation "a republic, if you can keep it."[18] It felt like we were keeping it.

My audience in the State Department auditorium responded with generous applause. But I wanted Americans at home to know I was speaking to them too. I wanted them to understand that we were building democracy in every sense, in our local communities as well as abroad. There would be no bright line dividing our foreign policy from our domestic policy. I wanted our actions to bring Americans tangible benefits, in the form of jobs, better health outcomes, and rising respect for Americans. As I said, "Every action we take in our conduct abroad, we must take with American working families in mind."

On the campaign trail, I had often said that we must lead in every sense, not only by the example of our power but by the power of our example. With this speech, I had offered a blueprint for exactly that.

## CORNWALL

An important gathering took place on February 19, when the leaders of the G7 convened in a Zoom hosted by British Prime Minister Boris Johnson. Once again I announced, "America's back," and the group seemed very happy to hear it. COVID was very much on our minds, and even though vaccine distribution was accelerating, we still needed to coordinate between our nations and move forward aggressively with new vaccine development, to be ready for the future variants that were surely coming. The mood of the meeting was buoyant; our consensus on COVID gave us a platform we could all stand on, together.



9780316598484_PromiseMeAmerica_int_1P.indd 126 7/17/26 1:51 PM

It also helped that I had signed documents committing the United States to rejoin the Paris Climate Agreement. A leaders' statement committed us all to a green, sustainable COVID recovery, including substantial help in providing vaccines to other nations.[19]

I was already finding the G7 to be a congenial setting to develop shared policy between the leading democracies, and to defend democracy itself. On March 11, we received the news that China was clamping down on Hong Kong with restrictive new electoral changes, violating earlier promises to let Hong Kong remain a relatively open city. The very next day, the G7 issued a statement expressing "grave concerns" about China's failure to keep its earlier promises regarding Hong Kong's integrity, and its active stifling of dissent.[20]

On Earth Day, April 22, we had another virtual summit, with forty heads of state announcing environmental commitments (including a Chinese promise to cut back on coal use). I announced my plan to cut US emissions by 50 percent from 2005 levels by 2030, which would mean that half our electricity would come from renewable sources.[21] Justin Trudeau of Canada promised a nearly identical cut, by 45 percent, and Yoshihide Suga also announced an impressive plan to cut Japan's emissions by 46 percent from 2013 levels.[22]

Secretary of Defense Lloyd Austin and Intelligence Director Avril Haines said that climate change was no longer a marginal issue but would be "central" to US security interests moving forward. Treasury Secretary Janet Yellen also promised to increase our climate financing to other countries.[23]

Our virtual meetings were effective at generating momentum, but there was nothing like meeting in person, and so I was delighted to accept Boris Johnson's invitation to attend a G7 meeting in Cornwall from June 11 to 13, my first foreign trip as president.

Cornwall was an inspired choice, a beautiful corner of southwestern England that almost seemed to point toward America. It was an exciting three days. There had been no G7 meeting the previous year, and the ones before that had been fraught. A famous photograph

from 2018 caught Angela Merkel glaring stonily at Donald Trump, who made no secret of his displeasure at being there. The leaders had found it very difficult to find common ground in any of the summits between 2017 and 2019.

I had my disagreements with UK policy now and then—particularly after Brexit threatened to undermine the Good Friday Agreement of 1998, which had done so much good in bringing peace to Northern Ireland. That was important to me, as a proud Irish American. I also disapproved of Brexit for its ultra-nationalist claims, and for making many promises that could not possibly be kept. I believed that the populist leaders and opportunists who backed Brexit had sold the British people a bill of goods.

But even when I disagreed with a G7 leader, I preferred to work out our differences in private, especially if that leader was the host of our meeting, and my counterpart in the Special Relationship between the United States and the United Kingdom. Boris Johnson seemed to appreciate that; to the press, he called me "a breath of fresh air."[24] That was nice to hear, especially in a summit focused on improving the climate.

Unlike in 2018 and 2019, the friction was gone as we quickly found consensus on nearly all topics, particularly those relating to fighting the pandemic, stemming climate change, and coordinating our economic policies. The goals were ambitious. I announced that the United States would be donating five hundred million vaccines to poor nations, and we agreed to a five-point plan designed to coordinate research and prevent future pandemics from spreading as quickly as COVID had.

Our climate conversations were also exciting, as we discussed ways to forge a common front on reducing emissions and investing in renewables. Together, we pledged to reach net-zero emissions by 2050.

It was bittersweet to know that I was saying goodbye to an old friend, Angela Merkel, who was preparing to step down after a remarkable tenure. But it was a pleasure to meet new heads of state



9780316598484_PromiseMeAmerica_int_1P.indd 128 7/17/26 1:51 PM

who had begun their terms during the four years I had been out of office. I was impressed by France's Emmanuel Macron, who enthusiastically welcomed me into the group, but he asked hard questions about the rise of populism in the United States and how it might affect our long-term foreign policy. When I said, "America's back," he responded, "For how long?"

Another friend was Queen Elizabeth II, perhaps the most admired person on the planet. She and I had a natural rapport, which might have surprised my mother, to put it mildly. Mom's Irish blood made it difficult for her to admire the British Crown, and she remembered historical grievances as if she had experienced them personally. In fact (I can't believe I'm about to say this), the queen's steely strength, combined with the glint of humor in her eye, reminded me of no one so much as Catherine Eugenia Finnegan.

The queen hosted the G7 leaders at the Eden Project, a domed enclosure housing thousands of plant species in a rainforest environment. The occasion fit our climate conversation perfectly. I was delighted to see Her Majesty. She had been a fifteen-year-old princess in August 1941, at the time Franklin D. Roosevelt met Winston Churchill off the coast of Newfoundland in a top-secret rendezvous that shored up American support for a beleaguered Britain in the dark early days of the Second World War. That meeting probably did more to cement the Special Relationship than any other. During a prayer service, in which both Churchill and Roosevelt participated, an observer commented that it seemed like a wedding of sorts.

Boris Johnson knew this episode well, and proposed that we take a page from the history books to essentially renew our vows. I was happy to play my part, and together we signed a new Atlantic Charter, eighty years after Roosevelt and Churchill signed the first one, restating the fundamental principles that join our two countries together so seamlessly.[25]

I appreciated these excursions into Anglo-American history. But we were also working hard to address new threats and opportunities.



9780316598484_PromiseMeAmerica_int_1P.indd 129 7/17/26 1:51 PM

One of the better outcomes of the G7 meeting was a strategic rethink of our Asia policy. Far from Cornwall, China was expanding its footprint in the Pacific and Indian Oceans, and we were assessing the threat and determined to do something about it. Australia's prime minister, Scott Morrison, had approached Britain and the United States with a request for nuclear-powered submarines to help protect Australia in a time of growing intimidation from China in the waters that separated them. It was an awkward situation; Australia would be canceling an expensive submarine contract with France — a strong NATO ally. France was not happy with the decision. But it also reflected a strategic reality, that we were determined to counter China's rising aggression. The result of our conversations in Cornwall was AUKUS, a new security partnership between Australia, the UK, and the United States, which made the Indo-Pacific that much safer.

## GENEVA

From Cornwall, it was a short flight to Geneva, where I had a very different meeting planned. Instead of a comfortable session with like-minded allies, I was now going into a bilateral session with Vladimir Putin. I felt that it was important to meet with him and take his temperature. While I was ready to push back on any new Russian advances into Europe, I did not seek a conflict. With clarity, and candor, we could perhaps establish a stable, predictable relationship.

Earlier presidents had found a way to work with their Russian counterparts — one thinks of Kennedy and Khrushchev, as they both recoiled from the Cuban Missile Crisis and began to think of each other as allies in the hard work of peace. Or Reagan and Gorbachev, defying the conservative orthodoxies that had lifted them to power, and seeking a better outcome than the self-fulfilling prophecy of mutually assured destruction.

I was determined to do no less. I was clear-eyed about Putin, whose many aggressions had defined his leadership of Russia. In my



9780316508484_PromiseMeAmerica_int_1P.indd 130 7/17/26 1:51 PM

previous experience with Putin, I had learned some of his behavioral patterns. He liked to slouch during a meeting, feigning indifference, like a teenager who has just been told he can't stay up late. He also was well-known for coming in late to a meeting. Knowing all of this, I delayed my arrival until I was certain that he was already there.[26]

Our conversation was not exactly warm, but we conveyed our strongly held positions. At one point, Putin bragged about how large his country is, reminding me that it stretches across eight time zones. I quickly replied, "Yes, and they're all melting." I knew that temperatures were rising very rapidly in Siberia as the permafrost thawed and released huge amounts of methane. In 2020, a heat wave lifted temperatures eleven degrees above normal. Scientists called the permafrost a slowly ticking "methane time bomb."[27]

On that note, our meeting ended. Neither had gained much ground, and neither had conceded much either. I was willing to work together toward addressing threats that endangered both of our nations — and climate change was a perfect example. But something in Putin's petulant tone told me it was going to be a cold winter.

CHAPTER SIX

# AFGHANISTAN

Another ticking time bomb was in Afghanistan, where I had a very hard decision to make.

Afghanistan had been a battleground of empires for centuries; there was a long list of kings, emperors, and commissars who had stumbled there. It could be argued that the disintegration of the Soviet Union — Putin's "geopolitical catastrophe" — had begun in the rugged mountains of Afghanistan, where an invading Soviet army had bogged down after a 1979 invasion. Civic protests (many by mothers of troops) helped to expose Russia's rudderless leadership in the 1980s and accelerated a Soviet demise that was probably inevitable.

All of that made our own difficult experience in Afghanistan that much harder to bear. Why should we repeat the mistakes of the Russians? We were better than that.

On October 7, 2001, America went to war in Afghanistan. We went to track down Osama bin Laden and to bring him to justice. We went to degrade and dismantle the terrorist threat in Afghanistan. And we went to make sure America was never again attacked from Afghanistan.

Our troops achieved many successes, including a rapid defeat of the Taliban in November and December 2001. The Taliban had been protecting al-Qaeda operatives, including Osama bin Laden, who unfortunately escaped to Pakistan, during a battle around the Tora Bora cave complex. Ten years later, on May 2, 2011, I was in the White House Situation Room with President Obama when a team of Navy SEALs tracked bin Laden to a hideout in Pakistan and killed him. Justice was delivered by the United States.

But that progress did not translate into any kind of permanent "victory." The truth was more complicated. A series of interim governments failed to establish any kind of popular mandate, and over the years, a sense of futility set in. Our troops and their NATO partners served with tremendous courage and valor. But it was difficult to feel confidence that democracy was coming to Afghanistan anytime soon, or that our very expensive efforts to rebuild the country were making much of a difference. Instead, enormous sums of money disappeared into the hands of local officials.

As in Vietnam, it was possible to cherry-pick statistics to argue that a final victory was near. But year after year, the attacks on our soldiers continued, through improvised explosive devices or suicide bombings. And despite highly touted elections, it never seemed like the government had legitimacy in a society dominated by clannish rival tribes. When George W. Bush left office in 2009, no one could plausibly claim Afghanistan as a success.

When I was vice president, President Obama undertook an extensive review of America's policy in Afghanistan. I was deeply involved; in fact, he asked me to travel to Afghanistan in January 2009, even before his inauguration, so we could hit the ground running, with the most current assessment of the situation.[1]

The issue was whether to begin withdrawal or to surge more troops and assets and resources into the country. I argued strongly that a surge was a mistake. And that we needed to reset our policy as



9780316598484_PromiseMeAmerica_int_1P.indd 134 7/17/26 1:51 PM

one of counterterrorism, not counterinsurgency. That meant we were there to root out terrorism and terrorists — not to put down uprisings. I didn't believe we were in Afghanistan to remake the country, though I know many believed that was why we were there. To me, that was a fool's errand. Afghanistan isn't called the "graveyard of empires" for no reason. It's called that because major powers have tried for centuries to remake the country in their image. It has never happened. And it never will. Afghanistan was never going to be an American-style democracy.

I didn't win that debate during the Obama presidency. President Obama chose to surge troops and assets and resources. In the early weeks of his presidency, he sent seventeen thousand troops to Afghanistan, bringing the total to thirty-seven thousand.[2] Increased aid for Pakistan was supposed to win Pakistani cooperation and improve Afghanistan's stability. More troops were sent, bringing the total to about sixty-eight thousand in August. In December, we sent thirty thousand more.[3] But again, "victory" was elusive.

By the tenth anniversary of the war, in 2011, we had a hundred thousand troops still there, and not much to show for it. The war was also becoming unpopular at home. Understandably. We made periodic announcements of plans for a drawdown — by the end of 2014, or the end of 2016 — but circumstances never permitted a complete withdrawal. Still, the numbers of troops did decline dramatically, to about 9,800 at the end of 2016. But stresses between American troops and the Afghan government were increasing, and the Taliban insurgency never vanished. Instead, it was getting stronger.

I believed then that staying was a mistake. And I believe it now. It bogged down the US for nearly another decade. I believe we should have taken the opportunity to leave on the heels of eliminating bin Laden. That was a natural point of demarcation that I thought the country could understand. We had come to deliver justice to bin Laden. We did that. Now it was time to focus on the future.



9780316508484_PromiseMeAmerica_int_1P.indd 135 7/17/26 1:51 PM

So I already had a strong view on what to do in Afghanistan when I came to the presidency, but the problem of American withdrawal had become very complicated in the spring of 2021.

Like Presidents Bush and Obama, Donald Trump inherited a difficult situation when he became president in 2017. I did not envy him; he was about to learn, as we had, that there were no easy solutions in those rugged landscapes.

Donald Trump often lambasted President Obama for our troubled, ongoing presence in Afghanistan. That was his right as a candidate. But when handed the reins, he was slow to make a decision. In a speech he gave on August 21, 2017, he complained about how he had inherited "a bad and very complex hand" when he became president. But the truth is, we all inherit difficult hands as incoming presidents — and especially in Afghanistan. Barack Obama certainly had, and he never complained about it. Donald Trump promised that "in the end, we will win," and that "victory will have a clear definition," but even before he finished speaking it was clear he had no idea how to achieve it. Far from pulling troops out, as he had promised to do, he added more, in an open-ended commitment with no timeline.[4]

I also remember a startling convergence. While criticizing President Obama, he seemed to be espousing a strategy similar to one that had been advocated in the Obama White House, and specifically by me. As the *New York Times* wrote the next day, "In some ways, Mr. Trump's emphasis on a stripped-down counterterrorism mission was reminiscent of the approach advocated by former Vice President Joseph R. Biden Jr. and ultimately rejected by Mr. Obama."[5]

As the bluster continued, the situation on the ground atrophied. In January 2018, the Taliban carried out an audacious series of attacks.[6] In 2019, President Trump visited Bagram Air Force Base in Afghanistan for Thanksgiving — a commendable gesture. Again, he delivered promises of "victory," and insisted that "we will win like the old days."



9780316598484_PromiseMeAmerica_int_1P.indd 136 7/17/26 1:51 PM

A month later, *The Washington Post* published "The Afghanistan Papers," a series that revealed a policy in tatters. It could find little progress to cite, despite the deployment of 775,000 troops since 2001, 2,300 of whom had given their lives. It also estimated a cost of nearly $1 trillion.[7]

The following year, 2020, the Trump administration signed an agreement with the Taliban on February 29, to withdraw US troops in fourteen months, if the Taliban maintained a commitment to contain terrorism. The government of Afghanistan had been entirely excluded. The date of withdrawal was set for May 1, 2021, less than four months after the beginning of my presidency.

Over the final eleven months of the Trump administration, US troops were reduced from 13,000 to 2,500, the lowest level of American forces on the ground since we went to war there. As part of the deal, President Trump pressured the Afghan government to release 5,000 Taliban fighters who were in prison. Most importantly, though, Trump had struck an agreement with the Taliban that they would not attack US troops in advance of the final withdrawal date. That resulted in protecting US lives — but it also carried with it a clear corollary: If the United States did not leave, all bets were off, and the Taliban would resume attacking and killing Americans. That was the ticking time bomb Donald Trump had left me. What it meant was that as soon as the withdrawal date passed, I would almost certainly have had to surge troops to Afghanistan to protect our small number of remaining forces against a renewed conflict with the Taliban.

Effectively, we had three months to devise a strategy — a significantly worse hand than any of my predecessors had been dealt. But I was also glad for the chance to end America's longest war, and determined to do it with as little loss of life as possible. An easier decision would have been to kick the can down the road and maintain a presence for a longer period of time. But I recognized that that would cost more billions and more lives — especially with the Taliban pledging more attacks the longer we stayed.



9780316598484_PromiseMeAmerica_int_1P.indd 137 7/17/26 1:51 PM

With the Trump deal with the Taliban hanging over our head, I ordered a full review of our options and discussed them in pointed, searching conversations with my national security team and my military advisers.

In my Democratic National Convention speech in 2012, as Barack and I were running for reelection, I said, "If you are looking for a bumper sticker to sum up how President Obama has handled what we inherited, it's pretty simple: Osama bin Laden is dead and General Motors is alive." And yet when I was sworn into office in 2021, we were still at war in Afghanistan. Frankly, we couldn't say why. In fact, we hadn't been able to answer that question honestly and clearly for a long time.

It was an odd predicament. The safest thing to do politically was to stay in Afghanistan. But was that real leadership? The more I thought about it, the more I thought: No. No one could convincingly explain our compelling interest in Afghanistan. We were spending a great deal of money to maintain our troop presence in an unforgiving terrain, at constant risk, with a population and a government that showed no sign of maintaining a unified, stable democracy. In pointed, searching conversations with my national security team and my military advisers, I aired these feelings in the early months of 2021.

I want to say a word about how much I admired them. Lloyd Austin, the secretary of defense, was the soul of integrity. I trusted him completely. A West Point grad, he had served with distinction in both Iraq (where he commanded all US troops) and Afghanistan. He knew the terrain and the difficulty of defending it.

General Mark Milley was equally impressive. The chair of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, he brought his forceful personality and powerful intelligence into all our meetings. He had served President Trump before me, and I appreciated that; it is appropriate to leave politics at the water's edge as we ask our military and diplomatic professionals to defend America's interests around the world. General Milley's briefings were always confident and colorful, and I enjoyed them thoroughly.



9780316598484_PromiseMeAmerica_int_1P.indd 138 7/17/26 1:51 PM

We all had a great relationship, and I urged them to present their thoughts candidly — I didn't want yes-men. I wanted the best advice I could possibly get, even if it went against my own thinking. I would argue that one of the most important elements of the job is to listen to contrarian views, and to get the whole picture. My job was to make the tough decisions. Their job was to give me their best possible advice. I had been around Washington long enough to know that the quality of the advice varied. But I also knew that with Lloyd and Mark, I could always count on their absolute integrity.

As I began to convey my sense that it was time to wind down our presence in Afghanistan, I got plenty of resistance. Secretary Austin and General Milley were both troubled by the implications of the decision.

No one wanted the United States to look like a nation that abandoned its commitments. But a close study of history presented compelling evidence that we had gotten this wrong on many occasions, believing too-optimistic predictions, and asking our men and women in uniform to do a job that was becoming increasingly impossible. I knew, with a parent's grief, that every death of a service member is a heavy sacrifice. If it must happen, it should be in service to a great cause. We didn't have one in Afghanistan.

I knew which way I was leaning. In the film *Gran Torino*, Clint Eastwood's character, a grizzled old vet named Walt Kowalski, says, "I finish things." This war needed to be finished.

I made the decision to end America's longest war. After twenty years and more than $2 trillion, and 2,448 American deaths, I ordered the withdrawal of American forces. I was now the fourth president to preside over a very long deployment. They included two Republicans and two Democrats. I would not pass the responsibility to a fifth.

I did it because we had long ago achieved the goals we set out for ourselves when we went to Afghanistan: to bring bin Laden to justice and to degrade the terrorist threat to America. I did it because the terrorist threat to America had changed over the past twenty



9780316598484_PromiseMeAmerica_int_1P.indd 139 7/17/26 1:51 PM

years — away from Afghanistan to a range of other nations. And I did it because I couldn't justify either the continued cost of the war or the continued risk to US lives.

I believe I made the right decision. I believed we could leave Afghanistan, redeploy our assets to meet the new threats of today, and still retain what is called an "over-the-horizon" capability to enter Afghanistan at any time from outside the country to neutralize a terror threat if one arose.

I would make the same decision again. Ending the war in Afghanistan was the right thing to do. America had long since lost its way.

On April 14, I addressed the nation in a televised speech.

First, I made it clear I was speaking from the Treaty Room, on the second floor of the White House. Some impressive history had taken place there, including the signing of the agreement that ended the Spanish-American War in 1898, by William McKinley, and the signing of the Nuclear Test Ban Treaty in 1963, by John F. Kennedy.

The Treaty Room was also where, twenty years earlier, George W. Bush had announced that we were going to war against Afghanistan. At the time, he had explained that our objective was to root out al-Qaeda and prevent future terrorist attacks against the United States. It took a long time, but we finally brought justice to Osama bin Laden.

But our mission had drifted in the years that followed, as I knew well from my many visits as vice president. Even with overwhelming military superiority, we were never going to create a durable Afghan government. That was the job of the Afghans themselves. At the end of the day, it was up to them.

There were still terrorists, but they had become more dispersed, finding new hosts, like al-Shabaab in Somalia, al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula, al-Nusra in Syria, ISIS in Syria and Iraq, and other affiliates in Africa and Asia. With the terror threat now spread so thin, keeping thousands of troops grounded in just one country



9780316598484_PromiseMeAmerica_int_1P.indd 140 7/17/26 1:51 PM

at a cost of billions a year to American taxpayers made little sense to me.

I would not pass the buck. I had inherited a signed agreement between the United States and the Taliban, and I was obligated to honor that agreement. It stipulated that all US forces would be out by May 1, only three months after my inauguration. It was not the agreement I would have negotiated, but its details had been made public to the world, and the honor of the United States was at stake. So I agreed to press forward with the withdrawal. It would begin on May 1, and we set September 11 as our deadline for completion.

I knew how brave the men and women on the front lines were, so I addressed a few words directly to them. I spoke as a father whose son had served in a war zone. I said the war in Afghanistan was never meant to be a multigenerational effort. Already, we were seeing the children of veterans coming to Afghanistan, to serve where their parents had. We had achieved our original goals of killing bin Laden and degrading al-Qaeda. Now it was time to end the forever war.

---

As the withdrawal date drew near, I directed military assets to be prepositioned in the region, ready to help with an evacuation. I was given a number of assurances from the military and intelligence communities, most crucially that the Afghan government would be able to stand on its own and that the capital would hold for at least six months after we left. This would prove not to be true.

It certainly was not for any lack of military or financial support. We maintained all our commitments to the government for as long as it remained in place. But over the course of the summer, it became increasingly obvious that the Afghan government could not or would not stand up for itself. The Taliban had been making inroads since signing the deal a year earlier, and their attacks intensified on May 1. Throughout May, June, and July, the Taliban went from one province



9780316598484_PromiseMeAmerica_int_1P.indd 141 7/17/26 1:51 PM

to the next, persuading local leaders to drop their allegiance to the national government.

I did all I could to impress the gravity of the situation upon Afghanistan's president, Ashraf Ghani. On July 23, I had a call with him, during which he insisted that he and his troops were ready to defend their country.[8]

But as the Taliban approached in the weeks that followed, he fled, and the government's defenders put down their weapons within a matter of hours. The six-month window I had been promised evaporated in a matter of days. It would have a profound impact on the orderliness of the withdrawal.

I was also given assurances about the exposure of any US military personnel, especially as it related to any of the entry points into the airport. Again, that assurance would prove not to be true.

In August, we ordered troops to the region to be prepared to help protect our embassy and the Kabul airport. On August 15, the government collapsed as Taliban troops entered an undefended presidential palace. The Afghan army simply melted away.

The next day I spoke to the nation and said, "I stand squarely behind my decision. After twenty years, I've learned the hard way that there was never a good time to withdraw US forces." But I also wanted to be candid, and I admitted, "This did unfold more quickly than we had anticipated." I took responsibility for that, and said, "I am president of the United States of America, and the buck stops with me."[9]

In the days that followed, I was intensely focused on the evacuation. I stayed in close touch with my team, and I confirmed daily that they had what they needed. They had a hard job, no doubt about it, but force protection was my number one priority.

On August 26, a suicide bomb was detonated at the Abbey Gate at the Kabul airport. General Milley shared the news with me at 9:15 a.m., just after I had walked into the Situation Room for the morning's operational briefing. It was devastating, and I knew that the news would only get worse over the course of the day, as the death toll rose.



9780316598484_PromiseMeAmerica_int_1P.indd 142 7/17/26 1:51 PM

In the end, it included 13 brave American service members, and 169 Afghan civilians. Each fatality was devastating to me.[10]

They were heroes, as were the 2,452 Americans who had lost their lives before them. Though I know this loss of life was especially bitter because it came so close to the end.

I think about them, and their heroism and their families, every day.

Dover Air Force Base in Dover, Delaware, is home to the Air Force Mortuary Affairs Operations Center. As a result, it is the first place in the United States where the remains of service members killed overseas arrive. The ceremonial transfer — from plane to awaiting vehicle — is a solemn moment, and one that I had attended several times as senator and vice president.

It goes without saying that I attended the dignified transfer when those thirteen Americans were brought back to the United States. Jill came with me, as did Secretary Austin and General Milley.

To prepare for the transfer, held on August 29, I learned all I could about each lost service member, including their parents, siblings, and, in some cases, spouses. I wanted the families to feel that I was with them in every sense. The military handled the transfer with its typical efficiency. There were military chaplains and aides, guiding us to our places. I visited with each family and stayed with them for as long as they wished, absorbing their grief, and sometimes their anger. I have always felt that there is a pastoral aspect to the presidency, and that my own experience with grief has allowed me to connect with others experiencing loss and suffering in their own lives.

Usually, when I join these communities of loss, it is because some terrible tragedy has befallen them; a fire or flood, a collapsed building or mass shooter. I go to them to be a source of strength. In this case, several families saw me as the source of their suffering.

Still, I wanted to do all that I possibly could to express a nation's gratitude for their loved ones' sacrifice. Some of the family members wanted to stay in touch, and we did; the widow of a lost serviceman later came to the White House to see the holiday decorations. I know

9780316598484_PromiseMeAmerica_int_1P.indd 143 7/17/26 1:51 PM



some of those families will always hold me responsible for their loved ones' deaths and never forgive me. I understand it and respect it. The burden of being president is that hard decisions fall on your shoulders, and those decisions can have tragic consequences. I knew that going into the job.

When the Afghanistan operation was over, we conducted the largest evacuation airlift in history, taking over 124,000 people out. I was proud of our troops for tackling a very difficult challenge with grace, skill, and extraordinary courage. There were countless stories of heroism as they took care of their brothers and sisters in arms and helped our Afghan allies to find safe passage. But I could never forget those thirteen lost lives, and I never will. Nor could I forget the Americans who had died to advance the mission since it began in 2001. They included 2,465 military personnel, 3,917 civilian contractors, and 19 CIA operatives.[11] In addition, 20,769 Americans were wounded. We owe them an immeasurable debt of gratitude.

I lived through what every other president who looked at withdrawing from Afghanistan knew would happen whenever the United States chose to leave. It would be messy. There was no perfect time. I chose to act. And I will accept and have always accepted full responsibility for the decision to leave.

In September after the withdrawal, I again addressed the nation. I spoke from the State Dining Room in the White House. I spoke first of the bravery and skill of the US troops. They had evacuated more than twice the number that experts thought possible. They had done everything asked of them, under impossible circumstances.

I then spoke about the need to learn lessons from our twenty-year war in Afghanistan. We must set missions with clear, achievable goals — not ones we'll never reach. And we must stay clearly focused on the fundamental national security interest of the United States of America. In Afghanistan, over twenty long years, we had forgotten both lessons. But our forever war had finally ended. Forever.

## ROME

In the weeks after the speech, I focused on domestic priorities, including the ongoing campaign to jump-start the economy and heal from COVID. The economic numbers coming in were remarkable, and the American Rescue Plan was living up to its name.

The fall of 2021 also brought another trip to Europe, when I traveled to Rome for a summit of the G20, held on the last two days of October. This offered a chance to consult with world leaders, most of whom attended in person (although Xi Jinping and Vladimir Putin attended virtually). The summit was relatively brief, but we were able to do some good work, rolling back tariffs that the Trump administration had inflicted on trading partners in the European Union. Because the Europeans had responded by imposing retaliatory tariffs, Americans were paying higher costs for their products, and we wanted to do away with what was basically an unnecessary tax.[12]

This trip also offered a chance to see an old friend, His Holiness Pope Francis. I had met with him on many previous occasions, and I attended his inauguration in 2013. His lively intelligence and easy camaraderie had cheered me on each occasion. But it went deeper than that. In September 2015, when he came to the United States, I was his official escort and we spent meaningful time together, talking about our shared values and praying together. It was only four months after Beau died, and his empathy did a great deal to lift my spirits. It wasn't simply that he was the leader of my church, he also paid attention to the small details (for example, learning all the names of my family members). We had a real connection, which I cherished. I considered it a rare blessing.

In Rome, we spoke for an hour and a half, about topics that we each were thinking hard about — COVID, climate change, disinformation, and all the ways in which we were both trying to bring about change in a world that often resists it. As we were leaving, I gave him



9780316598484_PromiseMeAmerica_int_1P.indd 145 7/17/26 1:51 PM

a special memento, a coin from the 261st Signal Brigade of the Delaware National Guard, the unit my son Beau had served in.[13]

Then in the early days of December, we held a "Summit for Democracy" in Washington. Across many platforms, online and in person, we hosted a variety of international leaders, eager to tell us about their experiences building democratic governance, reducing corruption, and serving the public interest.[14] As I said in my welcoming remarks, "This gathering has been on my mind for a long time for a simple reason: In the face of sustained and alarming challenges to democracy [and] universal human rights … all around the world, democracy needs champions."[15] Every year, Freedom House tabulated the number of democracies around the world, and for the fifteenth year in a row, the number had declined. So we needed to step up and do our part. As my friend the late Congressman John Lewis wrote in an essay shortly before he died, "Democracy is not a state. It is an act."[16]

Most people did not know it at the time, but there was another reason we needed to step up to defend democracy. Far from Washington, it was increasingly under siege in eastern Europe. Throughout 2021, my daily intelligence briefings had included reports of Russian military activity in and around Ukraine, particularly in the eastern Donbas region, where there was a high concentration of Russian speakers. It appeared that Vladimir Putin was up to his old tricks — except this time, he wasn't trying to seize a peninsula; he was going after the entire country.

Throughout the year, Putin had been talking about his aggrieved sense that Russia's destiny had somehow been violated by the breakup of the Soviet Union, and that Ukraine, in particular, still belonged to Russia. Now he appeared to be ready to launch an invasion.

On December 7, I called him and warned him that we were paying close attention to conditions on the ground. Five days later, the G7 issued a forceful statement, declaring that there would be "massive consequences" if Russia invaded. Typically, the Russians denied that



9780316598484_PromiseMeAmerica_int_1P.indd 146 7/17/26 1:51 PM

they were the ones altering the status quo and tried to blame Ukraine for provocations and even "genocide."[17] That was absurd.

These were troubling signals as 2021 was ending. But as I looked back on all that we had accomplished, I felt good about my first year in office. We had faced three historic crises the day we took office: a once-in-a-century pandemic that had frightened and isolated our country and the world, an economic crisis that the chair of the Federal Reserve said might have turned into a decade-long recession or worse, and a crisis in our democracy following January 6 that was as severe as any since the Civil War. We had made real and substantial progress on each. We had more work to do, but day by day, week by week, we were restoring faith in the United States, at home and abroad.

We had also restored our alliances. Once again, we sat at the head of the table. We had regained the world's trust the old-fashioned way — by earning it. We had protected our values while we also protected our allies, and we had increased our strength in every measurable way — military, economic, and diplomatic.

Harry Truman is often credited with the joke, "If you want a friend in Washington, get a dog." But it has also been said, more truthfully, that the best way to find a friend is to be one. Over the past year, we had proved beyond a doubt that we stood by our NATO allies. They in turn were ready to stand with us. If Vladimir Putin wanted to test us, we were ready.



9780316598484_PromiseMeAmerica_int_1P.indd 147 7/17/26 1:51 PM

CHAPTER SEVEN

# UKRAINE

We are a family of traditions, Christmas being one of our biggest. Ever since I can remember, my mom and dad would get the largest possible tree and put it up in the front window a few days before Christmas. There it would sit unadorned, with no lights or ornaments, until Santa decorated it on Christmas Eve. The aim was maximum sensory overload on Christmas morning. It always worked. Dad would walk down the steps first to see if Santa had come — then we kids would follow in order, eldest first, youngest last.

I carried on this same tradition when I started my own family. As our children got older, they were promoted to junior and senior elf status. That meant that they could string the lights and help make the artificial snow for the branches. The snow is made using a very sophisticated recipe, involving Ivory Snow and a blender (the exact details are a state secret).

It's more than the joy of being with kids and grandkids; it's also a deeply reflective time for me, as I remember the tragedy that took my wife and daughter on December 18, 1972, and nearly took my sons as



9780316598484_PromiseMeAmerica_int_1P.indd 149 7/17/26 1:51 PM

well. So I try to find an equilibrium, honoring past and present, and those who are absent as well as those who are with us.

We decided to celebrate Christmas 2021 in the White House; a change of venue from our home in Wilmington, but one that the family was happy about. Being president has its perks — a tree magically appeared and was beautifully decorated. But I missed the elves.

On Christmas Eve, we celebrated Christmas Mass, this time by Zoom, and in Biden tradition, we feasted not on fish but on spaghetti and red sauce. We were together, filled with gratitude, awe, and love.

On Christmas morning, we all opened our bedroom doors and gathered round the tree. We were a fortunate crew. But the question of the less fortunate was in the back of my mind, as it is every Christmas. My own Christmas wish was to continue the work of healing, and to help the poor and sick in particular.

On the first day of December, we'd had the first confirmed case of the Omicron coronavirus variant.[1] And on the 12th, the United States passed eight hundred thousand deaths.[2]

In a Christmas statement that Jill and I issued, we said, "For the nation, we pray for the promise found in scripture — of finding light in the darkness, which is also perhaps the most American of things to do."[3]

## BLINKING RED

While the lights on our Christmas tree were twinkling, I was concerned about another problem. The lights were blinking red in the daily intelligence reports I was getting about Ukraine.

In fact, on Christmas day itself — December 25 — Vladimir Putin claimed, falsely, to be withdrawing troops from around Ukraine.

For months, I had been certain Putin was going to launch a full invasion of Ukraine. At first, I couldn't convince anyone. Not the Europeans. Not the NATO countries. Not Ukraine.



9780316598484_PromiseMeAmerica_int_1P.indd 150 7/17/26 1:51 PM

But to me, the signs were unmistakable — to say nothing of a growing body of hard intelligence. Putin had been behaving erratically throughout 2021. At the very beginning of my term, I had found some success in my efforts to stabilize US-Russian relations around important shared interests. Foremost among these was our responsibility, as nuclear powers, not to blow each other up. Accordingly, one of my earliest phone calls was to Putin. We had a very short window in which to extend the New START Treaty, which limits the number of nuclear weapons that each country may possess. It had been negotiated in the Obama administration, and it was about to expire on February 5, without the Trump administration lifting a finger to extend it. I wanted to check that box and get it done. We did so.[4]

I had been watching Putin carefully for a long time, from his elevation to prime minister in 1999, and throughout my eight years as vice president.

In 2021, he appeared to be planning something significant. He likes to keep his rivals off balance — befitting a former judo instructor. In the spring of 2021, he positioned troops near Russia's borders with Ukraine, as if an invasion might be imminent. I called it out, with forceful words by phone, and again in our meeting in Geneva in June. By the time of Geneva, Putin had pulled back forces from the border, so there actually was not much discussion on the topic. We speculated that the buildup had been designed in part to get the face-to-face meeting, but in any case, I felt it was important to meet in person so there could be no mistaking my position.

After Geneva, the reports were calmer. The Russians stopped their buildup of troops. But that summer, Putin published a manifesto claiming that Ukraine was part of Russia, which immediately caught my attention.[5] In the span of a few months, Putin had both deployed forces around Ukraine and declared that Ukraine did not exist as a state. I did not yet have hard evidence, but I was convinced that Putin had Ukraine in his sights.



9780316598484_PromiseMeAmerica_int_1P.indd 151 7/17/26 1:51 PM

In the late fall, the evidence emerged swiftly and dramatically. In October and November, we began to receive alarming new reports. It was not merely that we could see Russian troops again moving toward the Ukrainian border — anyone could have seen that. It was that our deeper intelligence revealed clear plans by Russia to invade. And not just the Donbas region — all of Ukraine. The Russians were discussing a large operation to come. We knew the details.

This hard knowledge was certainly a blessing, but it also created a predicament. If I released it publicly, it would help to persuade some of our faltering allies that Putin did indeed intend to invade Ukraine. Many of our friends, even within NATO, were skeptical that Putin would take it that far. Some of our closest allies — Germany especially — were heavily dependent on Russian energy. Other voices within NATO were hoping for more European independence from the United States, after four years of ambivalence and worse from my predecessor. We needed them to see the situation clearly.

It's always dangerous to release intelligence; it can put at risk the sources and methods at work in our intelligence community, and it can make intelligence that much harder to collect in the future. We also had problems in our own recent past to deal with. The Iraq War had been forced upon the world by an administration with politicized intelligence. But this time, our goal was not to start a war but to prevent one. We needed to be absolutely certain that our intelligence was correct, and that we shared it in good faith with our friends.

These were complicated questions. But that's why they landed on the Resolute Desk. I made the call to declassify the information and release it, and I ordered all appropriate steps taken to protect the sources and methods of our intelligence agencies. I believed what the intelligence was telling us. The case was urgent. We needed to tell the world what we knew. The advance warning would expose Putin's treachery and help to counter Russian disinformation. It would also allow us to close ranks with our allies, and it would help the Ukrainians to prepare for the ordeal that was coming.



9780316598484_PromiseMeAmerica_int_1P.indd 152 7/17/26 1:51 PM

Not only was that the right thing to do, it was also a way to show the world that it could trust America again. For four years, Putin had been watching with glee as NATO grew weaker and more divided under the chaotic leadership of my predecessor. He was betting on a fractious alliance that would be distracted and unable to get its act together. I was determined to prove Putin wrong.

Even with the high quality of our intelligence, it was not always easy to persuade our allies or the Ukrainians to believe an invasion was coming. The Ukrainians worried that even the rumor of a war might cause their economy to crash. But eventually the specificity of what we knew proved to be decisive.

The intel included information about Russian plans for a coup in Ukraine, preceded by extensive sabotage and "false flag" operations designed to create a pretext that would justify a Russian invasion. Putin's henchmen had produced an elaborate propaganda video accusing Ukraine of treachery and demanding a strong response. With so many moving parts, this was almost a Hollywood production.[6]

I cannot overstate how important it was to receive this intelligence so far in advance of an actual invasion. It gave us precious time. Time to convince our European allies, many of whom found it hard to believe that Putin would do something so flagrantly illegal. Time to prepare sanctions that would hit Putin where he lived. Time to talk to Congress, to remind our Republican friends that we needed their help, and that we had a tradition, not much honored in recent years, that politics stopped at the water's edge. In all of these ways, our hard-working men and women in the intelligence community gave us an incalculable advantage.[7] They are not thanked enough, and it is not often possible to name them. But it's important to express a nation's gratitude.

In addition to releasing the intelligence, I used the power of the bully pulpit from time to time to speak publicly about the rising threat to peace and my feeling that Russia was getting ready to move in. I also approved a plan to deploy US troops into eastern Europe to shore



9780316598484_PromiseMeAmerica_int_1P.indd 153 7/17/26 1:51 PM

up NATO's eastern flank and to surge weapons systems (particularly antitank Javelins) to Ukraine to help in the country's defense.[8]

Of course, it was also important to communicate our resolve directly to the person most responsible for stoking these tensions. I had been raising the topic of Ukraine with Putin throughout the year, and I did so again, in a long call on December 7. He was cryptic, as usual. I was not. I explained that he would be punished with severe sanctions if he invaded, and that we would provide the necessary assistance for Ukraine to defend itself.[9] He shrugged and claimed innocence, in a way that was exasperating and unconvincing. Still, we did not want a war. To convey that clearly, I dispatched Bill Burns, director of the CIA, to visit his counterparts in Moscow in November.[10]

I had run my presidential campaign promising to always tell the truth to the American people. Here was another example of how we could push back against all the lies. Ukraine was far from perfect; I had long been concerned about its internal problems, and particularly a tendency, going back to the Soviet era, toward corruption.

But Ukrainians deserved a chance to build a democracy of their own, and they had made a lot of progress. I knew how brave rank-and-file Ukrainians were. They had withstood a lot in the twentieth century, including not just two world wars, with invading armies crossing in both directions, but three-quarters of a century of economic mismanagement by clueless Russian bureaucrats. It was mind-boggling that this fertile land — often called the Breadbasket of Europe — had suffered a devastating famine in the early 1930s, the Holodomor, or "Death by Hunger" in Ukrainian.

At best, it stemmed from the incompetence of Soviet officials, but it may have been deliberately engineered by Joseph Stalin as a form of punishment for a people who, even then, were too independent for their would-be overlords. Millions died — the precise number remains in dispute and will probably never be known, in part because the Russians destroyed records and denied that it even happened. Vladimir Putin had a well-blazed path to follow.



9780316508484_PromiseMeAmerica_int_1P.indd 154 7/17/26 1:51 PM

The Allied victory in 1945 hardly felt like a victory to most Ukrainians, who knew that they would have little chance of enjoying FDR's "four freedoms" as long as they were ruled by Stalin or his successor, Nikita Khrushchev (who grew up partly in Ukraine). Now they were trying to put all that behind them and build something better, rooted in the West. We could not stand idly by as the world's largest autocracy tried to erase a democracy from the map.

## SCRANTON

If I felt a strong respect for Ukraine's aspirations to join the community of democracies, there were many reasons, going way back, probably all the way to Scranton, my first hometown. It's a special place; just ask anyone who watched *The Office*. The show was set there, and the writers often poked fun at the city in gentle ways (calling it "the Paris of northeastern Pennsylvania").[11] That's all right; we can handle a joke. But the show also had a genuine affection for Scranton, which I appreciated.

It was a great place to grow up. Scranton had its problems. Some of the older industries were shutting down, and a lot of the families I knew were dealing with layoffs, or the fear of layoffs, which was nearly as bad.

But our working families took care of one another. Even in a time of decline, people checked in and made sure their neighbors were doing okay. Almost everyone came from a family with an ancestor who had come from Europe to work in the factories, or the coal mines, during the long period when those were thriving. Each group was proud of its heritage — whether Irish, Italian, Polish, or all of the above. The Ukrainians were an important part of the mix. There was a Ukrainian church, St. Vladimir, that we all knew, and Ukrainians were involved in every way in Scranton's thriving public life.

When my family moved to Delaware, it was the same thing all over again. Wilmington had a vibrant Ukrainian community, complete with a Little Ukraine neighborhood and two more churches, St. Nicholas and Sts. Peter and Paul.



9780316598484_PromiseMeAmerica_int_1P.indd 155 7/17/26 1:51 PM

Then, for years after, events continued to connect me to Ukraine. The breakup of the Soviet Union in 1991 was of the highest interest to me, as a senator on the Foreign Relations Committee. It was an extraordinary time and felt like a new beginning.

Those were heady days. It felt like a tremendous vindication of decades of determined US foreign policy, led by presidents of both parties and aided by a bipartisan Senate. We never retreated or lost focus. Instead, we steadily resisted the Soviet Union's attempts to threaten smaller neighbors while championing our own values in a way the entire world could see.

There was a temptation to celebrate Russia's humiliation in the early nineties, and many did just that. But I knew that it was a dangerous moment, and that we needed to proceed carefully. I applauded the way that President George H. W. Bush handled these delicate responsibilities.

This progress continued under President Bush's Democratic successor, Bill Clinton. In these years, Republicans and Democrats generally worked toward the same democratic goals, and there were a few hopeful moments that the world would be safer as it rapidly reorganized itself.

But there were new problems that followed the Soviet demise. For all its dysfunction, the USSR had kept a lid on the ethnic hatreds that had flared so frequently between the peoples of eastern Europe. Now Pandora's box had been opened, and throughout the 1990s we saw terrible "ethnic cleansing" in the Balkans, which the Clinton administration worked to mitigate. As a senator, I was a persistent champion of using American military might to restrain the architects of these genocidal policies.

Ukraine's situation was delicate in these years, as it tried to achieve its long-felt destiny as a free and independent nation while maintaining peaceful relations with the Russian Federation — the successor to the Soviet Union.



9780316508484_PromiseMeAmerica_int_1P.indd 156 7/17/26 1:51 PM

There were matters of great sensitivity to work through, including Russia's nuclear weapons left over from Soviet days and nuclear power plants like Chernobyl, a site of concern since its meltdown in 1986. The Russian Navy was another thorny issue. Since 1783, Russian naval vessels had been sailing into the Black Sea and beyond from Sevastopol, a large port on the Crimean Peninsula. That was a vital national interest that Russia's leaders wished to keep, understandably. It took years of negotiations, but in 1997, Russian and Ukrainian leaders worked it out in a series of agreements that allowed the Russians to stay, albeit by sharing some of their ships and facilities with Ukraine.

In all of these ways, it was clear that Ukraine was well on its way to becoming a country that was European, indisputably, but also tied very closely to Russia, with a lot of shared history and intertwined economies.

In the early days, I think the parties handled it well. Ukraine voluntarily surrendered the nuclear weapons on its soil to the new Russian Federation for dismantling, in return for a promise that Ukraine could now become, at long last, a sovereign state. Everyone was hopeful.

Russia had its ups and downs over the following decade, but Ukrainian-Russian relations seemed relatively normal as each country worked out the kinks of the Soviet breakup and charted a new course as an independent nation. Ukraine still had many Russian speakers, especially in Crimea and the Donbas. But they were legally distinct nations, with internationally recognized borders, and both had a chance to build a new and better history in the twenty-first century.

## A DARK TURN

In spite of the extraordinary opportunities brought by the end of the Cold War, and the hope that Russia would finally become a friend instead of an adversary to the United States, most of these efforts



9780316598484_PromiseMeAmerica_int_1P.indd 157 7/17/26 1:51 PM

faltered. It was not for a lack of trying, as the United States and our allies reached out to the new Russian Federation in countless ways, hoping to build lasting structures of trust and accountability. After decades of intense competition, we had a chance to see Russia turn into a normal nation that respected boundaries, protected human rights, and granted a wider field of opportunity to its own people.

Yet time after time, these initiatives came to naught. One might have thought that Russia would want to build a thriving and prosperous society, taking advantage of the talents of its many peoples. Instead, the Russian Federation grew sluggish, like the Soviet Union, with little economic activity outside of the energy sector and a people largely disenfranchised, suppressed by a corrupt elite. The new Russia is not identical to the old one — today, it is oligarchs, not Communist commissars, who wield the power — but the stifling effect is more or less the same.

Vladimir Putin entered the picture, first as prime minister in August 1999, then as acting president, and finally as president (apparently now a president for life). All of that happened quickly, as we in the United States were dealing with our own problems in the run-up to the 2000 election. We had enjoyed a remarkable decade of growth, prosperity, and freedom from the old dread of the Cold War. In short, we were not ready for all the damage an aggressive new leader of the Russian Federation could inflict on the world.

From the moment Putin became president, we began to see an erosion of democracy. George W. Bush was perhaps a little too hopeful when he said, famously, "I was able to get a sense of his soul," after looking Putin in the eye. That prompted a typically sharp riposte from my friend John McCain, who countered, "I looked into his eyes and saw three letters, a *K*, a G, and a *B*."[12]

It's hard to remember now, but there was a window of opportunity, in which Russians, and even Putin himself, seemed to want to relax tensions. In 2000, he told the BBC, "I cannot imagine my own country in isolation from Europe and what we often call the civilized



9780316598484_PromiseMeAmerica_int_1P.indd 158 7/17/26 1:51 PM

world. So it is hard for me to visualize NATO as an enemy." A year later, he was the first leader to call President Bush on 9/11 and offer his assistance in Afghanistan.[13]

But somehow, the hoped-for improvement never came. There were many reasons. The United States was not making many friends in the world at the time of the Iraq War, and a significant eastward expansion of NATO in 2004 brought the alliance to the edge of Russia, including three Baltic states (Lithuania, Latvia, and Estonia) that had been part of the Soviet Union. That was guaranteed to set off alarm bells in the Kremlin.

But Russia, too, was changing the balance, conducting brutal wars in Chechnya and Georgia and continually interfering in Ukraine's elections. Occasionally, that interference accomplished its purpose and helped to elect a president who was pro-Russian. But just as often it would backfire and drive Ukrainians to vote for an anti-Russian candidate.

Putin's own career was running into problems, too, thanks to a democratic requirement—hard to imagine now—that no president could serve three consecutive terms. He found a way around this obstacle, serving as prime minister for four years while his ally Dmitry Medvedev occupied the presidency from 2008 to 2012.

With Putin out of the top job, we felt like we had a real opportunity for a better relationship with Russia, and throughout the Obama years, I was in the middle of that effort. At times, I was cautiously optimistic. We signed an important deal to limit nuclear weapons, the New START, in 2010. Medvedev sometimes gave out reform-minded signals, suggesting he might be amenable to working with the West.

But Putin was just out of sight, still lurking in the background. In private meetings, he would lecture us about Russia's growing list of grievances and demand a right to control Ukraine.[14] That wasn't about to happen. I increasingly felt that he was going to be a significant problem for us, and for NATO, in the years ahead.



9780316598484_PromiseMeAmerica_int_1P.indd 159 7/17/26 1:51 PM

## LITTLE GREEN MEN

In late 2013 and early 2014, Ukrainians once again erupted in protest against a pro-Russian president. The Maidan Revolution was a serious and violent crisis that revealed just how determined the Ukrainian people were to shape their own future. It was in the immediate aftermath of the protests that Putin dispatched Russian troops, not wearing any identifying insignia, to seize Crimea. The media called them "little green men." They succeeded in their illegal actions, and a long nightmare of uncertainty about Russia's intentions began for Ukraine. Most Ukrainians consider this the beginning of the long Ukraine-Russia War.

So much for the reset. US-Russian relations never really recovered, and after Russia was ejected from the G8, it became that much harder to talk with Russia's leaders (Putin returned to the presidency in 2012).

In the years that followed, it seemed that Putin's resentments were deepening. His crackdowns on dissenters intensified, and he made a show of frequently attending church services of the Russian Orthodox Church, as if he were now the gatekeeper of ideological purity. He seemed to wallow more deeply in vague memories of Russian greatness, and to envy earlier leaders whose domains were larger than his own. He passed anti-LGBT legislation at nearly the exact time the United States was legalizing gay marriage. Disturbingly, there were elements in our own population who admired Putin for his grievances.[15]

As disappointing as Russia's choices had been since 1991, it was too large and important a country to ignore. So I remained focused on it, careful to look at the facts, not ideologies. Before the Crimea invasion, I had no desire to go out of my way to criticize Russia if it was respecting the rule of law and the obligations of international diplomacy. In one of my early meetings with Putin, as vice president, I even got a laugh out of him when I grabbed his shoulders, stared



9780316598484_PromiseMeAmerica_int_1P.indd 160 7/17/26 1:51 PM

deep into his eyes, and said, "I don't see any soul in there." With perfect comic timing, he answered, "Then we understand each other perfectly."[16]

Still, I was not afraid to call out Russian aggression when I saw it. There was hardly a day after 2014 when we did not hear of some outrage against Ukraine by Russian paramilitaries. Putin's cynical seizure of Crimea changed the equation, and so did his constant pressure on the Russian-speaking Donbas region.

During that time, Ukraine was high on our list of priorities, and I went there six times between 2009 and 2017.[17] Each time my plane crossed the Atlantic, my first glimpse of land down below was a sliver of Ireland jutting out into the sea. That always made me think about how lucky my family had been to make it to America, the land of second chances.

I wanted Ukraine to have a second chance too. Its people were as brave and as talented as any I knew. They deserved a country of their own. Why should they not make the most of themselves?

Going as often as I did, I began to think about Ukraine a great deal. Even then it felt like a battlefield of sorts, where the future would be won or lost. I attended a presidential inauguration and spoke repeatedly to Ukraine's parliament, the Verkhovna Rada. Even in the final days of the Obama administration, I made one last trip, in January 2017, to say goodbye.[18] I thought it was important to show solidarity with Ukraine's reformers, especially since there were ominous links between Donald Trump's campaign and the pro-Russian forces in Ukraine who were trying to stifle democracy.

I was not blind to Ukraine's faults; in each visit, I articulated a core concern — that Ukraine needed to deal with its own internal problems. There was too much corruption, and that rot permeated into the Ukrainian judicial system, where the rich and powerful were often free to buy their way out of accountability. As in Russia, oligarchs often lived in a reality all their own, bullying their fellow citizens, bribing government officials, and intimidating judges. Ukraine



9780316598484_PromiseMeAmerica_int_1P.indd 161 7/17/26 1:51 PM

would have to deal with these challenges if they wanted genuine integration with Europe and the West.

But I had also seen the inner strength of the Ukrainian people. They deserved a fighting chance. If they could create a real democracy, with checks and balances, and fair elections, they could be a bulwark in the region, and an inspiration to peoples everywhere who were trying to claw their way out of a history of repression.

Of course, that was precisely why Ukraine stuck in Putin's craw. It wasn't merely that Ukraine was often mentioned as a possible candidate for NATO membership—dating back to a general promise made in 2008, at the end of the Bush administration, but never acted on.

It was that Ukraine's success as a real democracy, with a flourishing economy, would make Russians recognize their own poverty and lack of opportunity. That was unacceptable to a leader whose lack of imagination required him to block his people from any knowledge of a thriving West. Putin's Russia had become a country where the rule of law was routinely disregarded and political enemies were jailed or killed. But it was much worse than that. Thanks to Russia, democracies around the world were vulnerable to electoral interference and manipulation of the truth. Including, of course, the United States.

It is uncomfortable for an autocracy to live side by side with a democracy, especially when the two peoples have a lot in common otherwise. For the same reason, China has largely crushed democracy and dissent in Hong Kong and is obsessed with doing all it can to thwart Taiwan's remarkable progress.

Naturally, Ukraine remained on my mind in the years that followed the vice presidency. At the Penn Biden Center, a think tank I set up with the University of Pennsylvania, we'd been closely monitoring foreign affairs and tracking important trends around the world. Ukraine was an object of sharp focus for my team and me. It was widely noted that autocracy was on the rise in many parts of the world, with China getting stronger, and strongmen dominating



9780316598484_PromiseMeAmerica_int_1P.indd 162 7/17/26 1:51 PM

their countries in other regions, including Hungary and Turkey, both NATO members. They certainly existed in our hemisphere as well, in Venezuela and Brazil, where a right-wing demagogue, Jair Bolsonaro, was a rising force, another election denier, perpetually threatening to jail or even kill his rivals.

Ukraine was on the front lines of a struggle that was even larger than the long Ukrainian-Russian border. Its survival as a democracy could give hope to all the other countries that were seeking a better way forward. In the same way that Germany and South Korea became urgent front lines for democracy at the beginning of the Cold War, Ukraine had become another vital test case.

I could hardly fail to notice when an unconventional candidate, Volodymyr Zelensky, won the presidency in 2019. Zelensky had risen to fame in Ukraine by playing a president in a TV show, *Servant of the People*, that was a comedy of sorts, but one that came oddly close to political reality. In the show, Zelensky's character was a high school history teacher who was filmed by one of his students delivering an expletive-filled rant against corruption. The student then posted the video on YouTube, and after it went viral, Zelensky's character was swept into office.

From this unusual background, Zelensky proved to be popular, winning the presidency with 73 percent of the vote. Zelensky seemed different from most politicians. Like the TV character he played, he talked about bringing an end to corruption. That was encouraging, and I hoped it would prove true. Meanwhile, Vladimir Putin was watching Kyiv with a growing sense of alarm. A charismatic Ukrainian leader who wanted to build bridges to the West was Putin's worst nightmare.

As a candidate for the presidency in 2020, I had a growing suspicion that Russia-Ukraine tensions would burst into view again. In my speech in Philadelphia in 2019 announcing my campaign, I warned that "tyrants and dictators all over the world are using Trump's language to stifle dissent and solidify their own power."[19] That was



9780316598484_PromiseMeAmerica_int_1P.indd 163 7/17/26 1:51 PM

certainly meant to include Putin, whose strange hold over Donald Trump had been much noted at home and abroad.

One of the reasons I chose Philadelphia for that speech was the simple fact that it was the birthplace of our democracy. Even as a candidate, long before winning, I felt that a struggle between democracy and autocracy was imminent. A year into my presidency, as the final days of 2021 ebbed away, I had a strong feeling about where that struggle would erupt.

## WINTER

Winter is not an ideal time to go to war with Russia, as Napoleon discovered. But we don't always have the luxury of choice when facing a hostile adversary, and it was clear that Putin was edging toward a confrontation. The days get shorter and darker in December and January, but we could see everything that we needed to, and I was not deceived for a second about Putin's intentions.

As usual, our intel was remarkable. There were long trains, loaded with troops, missiles, and heavy arms, crisscrossing Russia from as far away as Siberia, headed toward Ukraine.[20] The Brits revealed that Moscow had already chosen a lackey to serve as the head of a new Ukrainian government.[21]

Inside Kyiv, Russian operatives were already busy laying the groundwork. We knew that some were experts in explosives and urban warfare, and we expected that they were there to create a pretext for an invasion — a bombing at the Russian embassy, for example, which could then be blamed on Ukraine.[22] The rapid departure of Russian embassy staff was another reason to worry. Russian cyberattacks were already coming in at a steady clip, as they had been all year, in the United States as well as Ukraine.[23]

In other ways, too, Putin was on the offensive, changing the status quo and then blaming the United States when we called him out. Throughout the fall and into the winter, he had been making new



9780316598484_PromiseMeAmerica_int_1P.indd 164 7/17/26 1:51 PM

demands that were patently absurd — insisting, for example, that all US nuclear weapons be removed from Europe (where they had been for decades, as a deterrent to Russian attacks), and that all US troops leave the former parts of the Soviet Union (including the three Baltic states, now a part of NATO). No president could agree to these terms. I had done my part to reduce nuclear tensions already, in the first weeks of my term, when I extended our obligations under the New START Treaty. To even make these new demands was a serious provocation, and inherently destabilizing.

Still, I did what I could, exploring outreach to the Russians over their alleged security concerns and testing whether they were legitimate — for example, by committing not to deploy nuclear weapons or other advanced capabilities in Ukraine, and other confidence-building measures. It quickly became clear that all of Putin's demands were simply excuses for his determination to erase Ukraine from the map.

At times, Putin seemed to feel no constraints of any kind. In November 2021, he mused in public about the possibility of placing Russian submarines off our Eastern Seaboard, with hypersonic missiles, and threatened that their flight time to Washington would be "five minutes." This was outrageous behavior, reminiscent of Nikita Khrushchev's worst tantrums, and it specifically recalled the Cuban Missile Crisis. I was not going to put up with these antics. My team and I were preparing for every scenario.[24]

The intel kept coming, and most of what it foretold was plain to see. In mid-January, tens of thousands of Russian troops moved into Belarus for joint exercises, with the result that Ukraine was now vulnerable from the north. There were now more than 150,000 troops surrounding the country.

On January 19, I met with a bipartisan group of senators in the Oval Office, and that same day, called a press conference. It lasted nearly two hours, as I did my best to handle everything an agitated press threw at me. I wanted the American people to understand how serious the situation was.



9780316598484_PromiseMeAmerica_int_1P.indd 165 7/17/26 1:51 PM

I also wanted to speak clearly to Vladimir Putin. I predicted that the cost would be very heavy for Russians to bear, even if, with their huge numerical advantages, they might be able to prevail. I mentioned that I had been talking with Sauli Niinistö, the president of Finland, about what Russia was planning and how destabilizing Putin's actions had been. My intention was to make sure Putin knew that the Finns were rethinking their traditional neutrality because of Russia's aggression, and contemplating coming into NATO. This would be a serious strategic setback to Putin, even before any Russian soldier had crossed into Ukraine.

In my public remarks, I was still trying to offer an off-ramp to Putin. I insisted that Ukraine was not going to join NATO anytime soon, and that we were not positioning nuclear weapons or missiles aimed at Moscow in Ukraine, despite Putin's hysterical claims to the contrary. This was another one of his deliberate misreadings of history — he knew that the United States had helped Russia and Ukraine to negotiate the safe removal of nuclear weapons from Ukraine, back in the 1990s.

But I was highly skeptical that Putin would respond to any of these offers. He seemed to be living in a cloistered world. Many of my briefers believed that he too was a casualty of COVID isolation. He had been so afraid of getting the virus that he had closed himself off from his own team. He stewed in his grievances, daydreamed about the former glory of the Russian Empire, and imagined himself a czar (he kept a bust of Peter the Great in his office).[25]

Three days after the press conference, on January 22, I met with my senior military advisers at Camp David, the presidential retreat in the hills of Maryland. The United States and our allies put NATO on standby, and I ordered five thousand US paratroopers from the Eighty-Second Airborne to Poland. On February 10, Russia began ten days of maneuvers with Belarus, very close to Kyiv. It was not yet war, but it felt very close. Eight days later, on February 18, I told reporters that I was convinced Putin had already made the decision,



9780316598484_PromiseMeAmerica_int_1P.indd 166 7/17/26 1:51 PM

and Secretary Blinken went to the UN Security Council to warn the world that an invasion was imminent. Nearly half the Russian forces had moved into attack positions, near Ukraine's border.

On February 21, Putin gave another unhinged speech about all of his historical grievances. Increasingly, he seemed to be living in an alternate reality, in which a much smaller country, with no nuclear weapons, was the aggressor against a huge country, with many. He complained of "genocide" and the killing of women, children, and the elderly, even though Ukraine was threatening no one.[26] He also announced that he was recognizing two Ukrainian oblasts, or provinces, Donetsk and Luhansk, as a part of Russia (and claiming far more land than Russian forces controlled). We were at the precipice.

The next day, February 22, was George Washington's birthday. He was famous for telling the truth, and I wanted to uphold his standard. In a press briefing, I called it the way I saw it — "This is the beginning of a Russian invasion of Ukraine" — and the world began to absorb the terrible news.[27]



9780316598484_PromiseMeAmerica_int_1P.indd 167 7/17/26 1:51 PM

CHAPTER EIGHT

# WAR

Needless to say, Vladimir Putin did not uphold George Washington's standard. It was more George Orwell. The Russians issued a cascade of falsehoods from the earliest moments of the invasion. According to Putin, the war he had unleashed was not a war at all but a "special military operation." In fact, Russia was seeking "peace" as it was attacking (he called the soldiers "peacemakers"). Ukraine, the nation under attack, was not a nation at all but a historical fiction. Ukrainians were now "neo-Nazis," an egregious insult to a people who had been invaded by both Nazis and the Russians (and who were now led by a Jewish president).

But historical accuracy was not the point. To distract from his own problems with the truth, he labeled the United States an "empire of lies."[1] Over the years, I've noticed that the worst insults used by autocrats usually describe themselves better than their targets.

Putin delivered another long-winded harangue in the early morning of February 24, as 190,000 Russian troops began to cross the border from three directions.[2] I learned of the invasion late on the 23rd. Jake Sullivan, my national security adviser, called me around



9780316598484_PromiseMeAmerica_int_1P.indd 169 7/17/26 1:51 PM

10 p.m. with the news, and I asked him to keep me briefed with updates throughout the evening. I don't think any of us slept much that night.

In the morning, the world was in shock. My team, however, was prepared. We had spent the past several months informing our allies, in painstaking detail, about Putin's plans to invade. We had used the time — with the UK, France, Germany, and Italy and with NATO and the European Union — to prepare powerful sanctions against Russia, bolster aid to Ukraine, and shore up our own defenses.

But many were surprised, all the same. Our friends had not wanted to believe it was possible that Europe would ever be at war again. There was surprise, too, over the scale of the invasion. It was not the military incursion into the disputed areas of the Donbas many had expected. Just as we had warned, this was a full-on attempt to take over all of Ukraine, a sovereign nation of considerable size. The troops coming over the border from Belarus were heading straight for Kyiv, to decapitate Zelensky's government.

Even as the invasion was beginning, Putin kept trying to blame us for his aggression. He was also warning us not to interfere, in language that came close to a nuclear threat: "Anyone who tries to interfere with us, or even more so, to create threats for our country and our people, must know that Russia's response will be immediate and will lead you to such consequences as you have never before experienced in your history."[3]

I refused to be intimidated. I immediately put out a statement that "President Putin has chosen a premeditated war that will bring a catastrophic loss of life and human suffering." I added, "Russia alone is responsible for the death and destruction this attack will bring, and the United States and its allies and partners will respond in a united and decisive way. The world will hold Russia accountable."[4]

If some of our allies had been slow to heed our warnings, they quickly regrouped and looked to us for leadership, building on the preparatory work we had done throughout the early winter. This was



9780316598484_PromiseMeAmerica_int_1P.indd 170 7/17/26 1:51 PM

one of those moments where being the "leader of the free world" really means something. I was proud to step up and support Ukraine.

But it is never easy to go to war. My opposition to the Vietnam War was one of the reasons I decided to run for the Senate in 1972. That war had been a black eye for the United States for nearly a decade, with heavy civilian casualties, a feckless ally in South Vietnam, and strategic cluelessness on our part. Our goals shifted all the time. We failed to communicate them well, to the troops or the public. Our reliance on air superiority did little to change the situation on the ground. It was a mess, and we had little to show for our overwhelming financial and military investment. I was proud of our brave soldiers and sailors — always — but furious that they had been asked to give so much for such a poorly defined mission.

Since then, I had always been on the lookout against similar military follies. On the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, I tried to guard against misconceived interventions, and the inevitable mission creep that follows when a war drags on too long, as it had in Iraq and Afghanistan.

Ukraine was not like that. Europe was much closer to the United States. Its peace and security were vital strategic interests — as our NATO alliance made clear. Here was a real emergency, and a chance for us to defend our values, our interests, and a friend at the same time. This was the first European invasion since the end of World War II, far worse than the internal conflicts in the Balkans in the 1990s, or earlier Soviet efforts to quell political protests in their satellites. For the first time in most of our lifetimes, two large countries were at war in Europe. All the alarm bells were ringing. The mission was clear — to give Ukraine the tools to defend itself against a large foreign aggressor, while taking care to avoid a larger war between great powers.

I knew how difficult it would be. We would have to surge weapons to Ukraine, and it is far from a simple thing to supply a nation under attack. We would have to create and coordinate an international



9780316598484_PromiseMeAmerica_int_1P.indd 171 7/17/26 1:51 PM

coalition. We would have to stay on top of the message, communicating every day, to friend and foe alike, why we were standing up for Ukraine. In Washington, as always, there were shrill voices in opposition.

But I knew that we were up to the challenge. The past year of bridge building had helped enormously. Our allies trusted us. I also understood that it would be even more costly to do nothing. That is always an option in Washington — to kick the can down the street and leave the problem for someone else to clean up. I didn't want to be that kind of president. I felt that it was important to stand up for democracy, at home and abroad. And to defend the Pax Americana that so many GIs had fought and died to make possible, during World War II.

Franklin D. Roosevelt made it clear that there was a purpose to the fight. Cross-border invasions would not be tolerated in the postwar order that followed victory. The UN Charter is clear, calling it illegal for one country to violate the sovereignty of another.[5] In 1939, World War II began when Hitler, appeased by the West, invaded Poland. We were not going to sit idly by while another great power tried to carve out a sphere of influence by crashing through all the guardrails.

It had been such a hard year for democracy, with January 6, and our ongoing struggle against COVID, and the constant encroachments of autocrats like Putin. In Asia, China continued to intimidate its neighbors, and to support autocrats. President Xi had recently announced that there were "no limits" to the friendship between China and Russia.[6] There was a feeling of lawlessness in the world.

It was time to push back. I knew it was crucial for America to show our strength. There was simply no one else who could handle these grave responsibilities. Our friends were looking to us for leadership. Putin was not only invading Ukraine, he was attacking the principles at the heart of the post–World War II system we had



9780316598484_PromiseMeAmerica_int_1P.indd 172 7/17/26 1:51 PM

worked so hard to build to prevent more wars. And his rambling speeches left little doubt that he considered the United States his enemy.

We were not; we had tried on many occasions to work productively with Russia. But Putin needed an adversary as he acted out his imperial fantasies. We could not let him get away with it. As I said at the time, "This aggression cannot go unanswered . . . America stands up to bullies. We stand up for freedom. This is who we are."[7]

The only language Putin understood was strength. I remembered a quote attributed to Churchill: "The Russians will try all the rooms in a house, enter those that are not locked, and when they come to one that cannot be broken into, they will withdraw and invite you to dine genially that same evening."

But there were other Russians too, who were protesting Putin's actions, and we appreciated their courage. As the war was beginning, we were getting signs of Russian unhappiness with the "special military operation." More than 1,700 brave Russian protesters were arrested on the first night of the invasion, in fifty cities, proof that Putin was not truly speaking for his country.[8]

I had often talked about the power of our example; now it was time to show Putin the example of our power.

I was glad to see how rapidly our allies came together. In a sense, Putin had done us a great service, by eliminating all doubts about his intentions. The wavering nations were now entirely behind us and determined to resist his aggression.

Quickly, the interlocking alliances and international organizations sprang into action. The United Nations denounced Putin for his violation of the UN Charter, both through an 11–1 vote in the Security Council (vetoed, naturally, by Russia) and then by a motion in the General Assembly, supported by 141 nations (only Russia, North Korea, Belarus, Syria, and Eritrea voted against it, while 35 nations abstained). NATO was also a whirlwind of activity. The G7 was fully engaged and on board. I convened a virtual summit with European



9780316598484_PromiseMeAmerica_int_1P.indd 173 7/17/26 1:51 PM

heads of state to forge a united front, and we spent much of that first day putting a plan into action.

There was a great deal to do, and time was of the essence. Our first priority was getting help to Ukraine, in the form of intelligence sharing, weapons, and economic assistance. Next, we needed to impose pain on Putin and his inner circle, and we were ready with an aggressive package of sanctions. Even as the invasion was beginning, I announced a sweeping set of financial penalties that we had already prepared in anticipation of Putin's plan.[9] We instantly froze hundreds of billions of dollars of their assets, denied access to our banks, and put an immediate ban on high-tech exports to Russia. Germany canceled an $11 billion gas pipeline, Nord Stream 2, that Russia had just built. Great Britain canceled all incoming flights on the Russian airline Aeroflot. The EU, Japan, and Australia also imposed sanctions. The list went on and on.[10]

It did not take long for these sanctions to have the desired effect. In a shattering blow to Putin's aura of omnipotence, the Russian stock market cratered, losing a third of its value on the first day of the invasion. The ruble dropped to a historic low.

By contrast, we were able to keep our markets strong. Russia's invasion of Ukraine had sent oil prices surging, and the result was plain for Americans to see, at gas stations and in the cost of groceries and everything else that moves across the country and around the world. Several advisers proposed tapping the Strategic Petroleum Reserve at around thirty million barrels — the largest release ever attempted at that point. Brian Deese and Amos Hochstein, one of my senior advisers on energy security, argued that we should be even more aggressive, and I agreed: We settled on the release of 180 million barrels over six months — one million barrels per day. We paired it with a push to increase domestic production and accelerate exports of American liquefied natural gas to Europe, seeking to achieve two goals in parallel: making sure Russia could not use energy as a weapon to break Europe's will to defend Ukraine, and making sure the American



9780316598484_PromiseMeAmerica_int_1P.indd 174 7/17/26 1:51 PM

people didn't pay the price for standing firm. I also directed our team to work with partners around the world on additional production increases and other measures. The plan was heavily criticized—by Republicans and by voices on Wall Street who argued that it was too aggressive, too interventionist, or that it simply wouldn't work. It did work. Gasoline prices, which peaked on June 14, 2022, at $5.03 a gallon, fell below $4 by August and retreated further still in the following months.[11]

But there were also dangers to consider. One was the possibility that Ukraine and its capital would fall in the face of overwhelming odds. We knew the Ukrainians were fierce fighters, but they were now up against a powerful enemy with significant advantages, including air superiority. By one calculation, the Russians had fifteen aircraft for every Ukrainian plane.[12] They had better missiles.[13] The Russians were invading from three sides, but we were especially concerned about the forces coming toward Kyiv from the north. Cruise missiles and ballistic rockets were raining down on Ukrainian cities and airports, causing additional mayhem. Many experts expected the invasion to last a few days, after which the Russians would install the compliant new president they had selected.[14]

We were also concerned about a potential environmental catastrophe. The Chernobyl nuclear power plant, which had melted down in 1986, sat squarely in the invasion path.[15] The nuclear plant at Zaporizhzhia, in the southeast, was also in danger.

Another worry was that NATO nations might be threatened. Ukraine borders four NATO allies, Poland, Slovakia, Hungary, and Romania. They could easily be in harm's way, to say nothing of the Baltic States that, like Ukraine, are next door to Russia. Accordingly, I ordered US troops to redeploy toward the NATO nations nearest to Russia, on NATO's eastern flank. I also made clear that they were there in strictly defensive positions.

But at the end of the day on February 24, Ukraine had not surrendered. President Zelensky appeared in a video, urging his countrymen



9780316598484_PromiseMeAmerica_int_1P.indd 175 7/17/26 1:51 PM

to fight on, and they were more than happy to do so. Putin's claims of "historical unity" between Russia and Ukraine appeared unfounded.

At the very least, that sentiment was not shared by a brave Ukrainian border guard, Roman Hrybov, guarding a strategic spot on Snake Island, in the Black Sea. On that same day, when threatened by a Russian warship, the *Moskva*, and ordered to surrender his position, he delivered a profane response. His colorful language caught the mood of the moment and, as it ricocheted around the world's social media, effectively conveyed Ukraine's determination to shape its own destiny. Within weeks, Ukraine approved the phrase as a postage stamp.[16]

Every Ukrainian seemed to feel the same way. The mood was defiant — and united. I had worried that President Zelensky, who had come from such an unlikely background, might not have the right stuff for a crisis like this one. This was no TV comedy. I was delighted that my worries proved to be unfounded.

On the afternoon of February 24, I thought I should report to the American people on what had been a very busy day. I delivered a speech from the East Room, explaining our actions and taking questions from the press. The response was overwhelmingly positive, and early signals from Congress were also supportive.[17]

Still, it had been only one day; it remained to be seen how Ukraine would fare over the next forty-eight hours, roughly the time frame that the Russians had estimated for their conquest.

## DAVID AND GOLIATH

Ukraine's tenacity only deepened in the days that followed. The fighting was particularly fierce around Kyiv. The Russians tried to circle the city, but Ukrainian defenders refused to surrender and showed tremendous initiative in the way they fought back, finding vulnerabilities in Russian tanks and helicopters. They were especially effective with shoulder-fired weapons, like the Javelin antitank missiles and



9780316598484_PromiseMeAmerica_int_1P.indd 176 7/17/26 1:51 PM

the Stinger antiaircraft missiles. Armed with a Javelin, a single soldier could take out a tank — it was like David and Goliath. I was proud of our foresight in getting significant shipments of Javelins to Ukraine in September and December. We didn't make a big deal of it at the time, to avoid giving the Russians an excuse to attack. But surely this advance planning tipped the balance for a people who were already strongly motivated to defend themselves.

When tanks were destroyed, they quickly became immense roadblocks for the long convoys of Russian vehicles trying to make their way toward Kyiv. Many of the vehicles were so heavy that they churned up the roads, adding to the logjam. The Ukrainians also quickly became adept at blowing up the fuel depots that accompanied the convoys.[18] Soon, there were photos of a forty-mile traffic jam, available for all the world to see. It was a perfect metaphor for Putin's stalled invasion.[19]

A particularly fierce fight took place around Hostomel Airport, outside Kyiv. The airport had a high strategic value for the aerial campaign the Russians were planning; they expected to take it easily, on the first day, and then use it to launch sorties. Fortunately, we had been able to alert the Ukrainians that this attack was coming, thanks to our intelligence. Forewarned, they were ready, and put up a fierce resistance. The Russians were able to take the airport, but it took days, and they were forced to pay an extravagant cost. The airport became so damaged that it was effectively unusable, and the Russians were denied a major advantage.

In the early days, the Russians fought their way into Kyiv's suburbs, but they could not capture the city itself. Every day that passed without a surrender gave more momentum to the Ukrainian cause. President Zelensky's unusual background as an actor turned out to be very good training for a leader seeking to rouse his people with constant messages on social media.

Every war produces new tactics and technologies, and this one was no different. An early lesson was how effective cheap drones



9780316598484_PromiseMeAmerica_int_1P.indd 177 7/17/26 1:51 PM

could be in determining the enemy's position and delivering firepower. I'm proud of the role we played in helping Ukraine build its now-formidable drone capability. Another lesson was the high value of keeping access to the internet, for both civilians and soldiers. An hour before Russia began raining missiles on Kyiv, it destroyed a commercial satellite network called Viasat that Ukraine's government and military depended on. That might have been a catastrophe, but an unlikely hero stepped into the breach — Elon Musk, who was able to restore Ukraine's internet connection through his Starlink fleet of small satellites.[20]

As the days stretched into weeks, we began to see a remarkable pattern. In many ways, it was a vindication of democracy itself. The Ukrainians understood how to think independently. Their society was more open than Russia's, and it showed. Their soldiers behaved like freethinking citizens. They were highly adaptive, learning quickly from their mistakes and adopting new tactics. Individual soldiers — like those firing the Javelins from their shoulders — showed initiative. They executed precise attacks, then quickly moved out of range of the Russian response. We had seen this before; it was a pattern of war much like the one that created the United States. Throughout the American Revolution, George Washington's ragtag troops had deployed a highly successful strategy by staying just out of range of the British redcoats in between guerilla raids.

The Russians, on the other hand, were surprisingly hapless. Even our own analysts expected an overpowering show of force from Putin's modernized military, rebuilt from the Soviet era. He had been bragging about it for years, and showing off his hardware in parades. Moreover, Russian military planners knew the countryside extremely well; after all, Ukraine had been a part of the Soviet Union.

But when the Russians went into action, they showed serious shortcomings. Commanders were cautious and displayed no imagination. Often they knew almost nothing of the invasion plans, because Putin had kept the plans so secret. Even with an enormous advantage



9780316598484_PromiseMeAmerica_int_1P.indd 178 7/17/26 1:51 PM

in aircraft, Russian pilots flew in predictable patterns, enabling the Ukrainians to pick them off easily. Many of the troops were underequipped, with hardly any food, and instructions on how to fire their weapons printed from the internet. Some carried helmets and weapons left over from the Second World War.[21]

We realized that this was another sign of the rampant corruption that characterized so much of Russian society — military contractors had stolen or sold the best products, leaving old hand-me-downs for the troops going into battle. Many had no training; they were simply factory workers or truck drivers who had been conscripted. Or in the case of the Wagner Group, an independent militia formed by Putin's crony and former chef Yevgeny Prigozhin, a large number of the recruits were convicts.[22] That is not the way to find disciplined troops.

At times, it was almost comical. So many Russian soldiers called home to complain about their misery, on unsecured phones, that Ukrainian eavesdroppers could determine their positions and call in strikes.[23] Another problem was hubris. Putin was so overconfident that he ordered many of his men to pack their dress uniforms, for the victory parades that would soon be organized in Kyiv.[24]

But there was nothing comical about the war crimes that the Russians were committing, as they stalled in their advance on Kyiv. On April 1, as the Russians retreated from the town of Bucha, outside Kyiv, it became clear that they had killed more than four hundred local civilians, including children. Many were assassinated at close range. Predictably, Vladimir Putin called it "fake news." He denied all responsibility, then honored the battalion charged with the massacre.[25]

## SPRING

Throughout the spring, I kept a close focus on the war, meeting daily in the Oval Office and the Situation Room to receive updates, talking to my military advisers, and checking in constantly with Jake Sullivan



9780316598484_PromiseMeAmerica_int_1P.indd 179 7/17/26 1:51 PM

and Tony Blinken. I was determined to provide Ukraine with the resources it needed. I also gave frequent briefings to the press and the American people. War is a serious business, and I wanted to keep the people informed, the right way — not with late-night eruptions on social media.

To shore up our alliances, I traveled to Poland and Belgium in March and found overwhelming solidarity in a Europe that was deeply shaken by Putin's aggression. On March 24, the one-month anniversary of the invasion, I was glad to be among good friends, at NATO headquarters in Brussels, for a summit of the alliance. Two days later, I gave a spirited speech at the Royal Castle in Warsaw, thanking the Poles for their contributions, praising Ukraine's stiff resistance, and promising NATO's full commitment to resist Putin.

On that occasion, I announced $1 billion of new assistance for Ukraine. We continued to ship ever-larger quantities of armaments, and our allies did the same. We sent Javelins and Stingers, tanks, armored personnel carriers, howitzers, rocket launchers, Patriot batteries, helicopters, drones, grenade launchers, rifles, and a huge amount of artillery. The list grew long, but we were careful in all that we did to maintain a distinction — not always easy to determine — between defensive weaponry and offensive weapons that Putin might interpret as a threat to Russia.[26]

This underlines an important subtext to the war, and a point of the highest strategic consequence, one that I was careful to keep in focus. Of course we wanted Ukraine to survive Putin's aggression and emerge as an independent nation, free to determine its destiny. But we were not insisting that Ukraine join NATO, contrary to Putin's accusations. The promise made in 2008 was premature; it would take time to work it out, and it might well be that Ukraine would find a special status, not in NATO but protected by a web of relationships with the European Union and the United States.

But even as we provided extensive aid, I wanted to avoid anything that would lead to a direct confrontation between the world's



9780316598484_PromiseMeAmerica_int_1P.indd 180 7/17/26 1:51 PM

two biggest nuclear powers. It was a delicate balance. At times, when the war was going badly for Putin — and there were many such moments — I kept a close eye on the situation, ready for any escalation in his rhetoric or actions. A catastrophic collapse of Russia's front lines might lead to a decision to use tactical nuclear weapons, to protect Russia's fleeing soldiers and prevent a rout. But I never — not once — allowed Russian threats and bluster to deter me from providing Ukraine with weapons. Security assistance shipments from the Pentagon to Ukraine never stopped under my administration.

I thought it was even conceivable, during some of Putin's more embarrassing setbacks, that he might be forced out of office, inside the inscrutable walls of the Kremlin. We had seen such pressures bring Nikita Khrushchev's career to a premature close, not long after the Cuban Missile Crisis was resolved in a way that seemed like a victory for the United States. I would not be sorry to see Putin removed, but the fear of removal might lead him toward desperate measures. Tactical nuclear weapons have never been used in a battle, although they were dangerously available to Russian field commanders during the Cuban Missile Crisis.

In short, we were striving for success in defending Ukraine but did not want to approach that level of danger. All our statements were carefully measured. I wish I could say the same for him. At several moments in 2022, Putin hinted that he was considering changes to the nuclear status quo — including an announcement in June that Belarus would adapt its aircraft to carry nuclear weapons.[27]

So I was apprehensive on April 14, the day when Ukraine scored an extraordinary success, sinking the flagship of Russia's Black Sea fleet, the *Moskva*. It was a stunning example of Ukraine's asymmetric approach to war. Two antiship missiles were fired into the *Moskva* when it was in a vulnerable position, exacerbated by the fact that there was a storm. The *Moskva* sank soon after. It was the first sinking of a Russian flagship since 1905, during the Russo-Japanese War.



9780316598484_PromiseMeAmerica_int_1P.indd 181 7/17/26 1:51 PM

This was great news, but also a searing humiliation for Putin. Ukrainians, of course, were ecstatic. This was the same ship that had ordered a border guard to surrender on day one of the invasion — drawing the profane response that was now enshrined on a postage stamp, with the *Moskva* in the background. So alert were the Ukrainians that they soon reissued the stamp with the *Moskva* removed from the background, deep-sixed into eternity.

I continued to travel throughout the spring, building up our coalition. In May, I went to Japan and South Korea, where our meetings went a great distance toward eliminating the tensions that had historically existed between these two nations, dating back to World War II. That was important to me. We needed both nations in our coalition as we rebuilt our Asian alliances. I also deeply appreciated their commitment to the cause of Ukraine, a sign of how strong and interdependent the community of democratic nations was becoming.

At one of my events in South Korea, on May 21, I participated in a wreath laying to honor soldiers killed in the Korean War. While I've never held back my objections to the Vietnam War, which in my opinion had poorly defined aims and never secured the backing of the American people, the Korean War was a different matter. That was a difficult cause — but the right cause. It saved South Korea from North Korean (and Chinese) aggression, and what a success story that has been. I've always felt that we should do more to honor our veterans who fought in a difficult struggle, under great adversity, for another people to have a better life. We made a difference. And now South Korea was helping us in another theater, simply because of the common cause we all felt, as fellow democracies.

## FALL

Of course, there were many other problems around the world, even as Ukraine was absorbing a lot of our attention. But we never took our eyes off the ball. If the power of our example was strengthening the



9780316598484_PromiseMeAmerica_int_1P.indd 182 7/17/26 1:51 PM

cause of democracy in places like Japan and South Korea, then the example of our power was also formidable in the many places where there were still operatives trying to do us harm. On July 31, 2022, we brought some long-overdue retribution to Ayman al-Zawahiri, the leader of al-Qaeda, who helped to plan 9/11 and was implicated in many other crimes, including the bombings of two US embassies in Africa in 1998 and the assassination of Egyptian President Anwar Sadat in 1981. We had been looking for him for a long time. With remarkable skill and precision, the CIA tracked him down to his hiding place in Kabul, Afghanistan, and we took him out with a drone strike. It had been eleven long years since the death of Osama bin Laden; once again, we showed the world that we are both patient and relentless when it comes to the quest for justice.

Heading into the fall, there were other trips—notably to the United Kingdom, in September, to honor the passing of Queen Elizabeth II. Her death signaled the end of an era, to be sure, and I knew I would miss her steady example and moral clarity. I also attended a trio of high-level meetings in Egypt, Cambodia, and Indonesia in November.

As the days grew shorter, there were still many anxieties about the situation on the ground in Ukraine. The Ukrainians had fought brilliantly, outperforming all expectations. But the odds were still against them. Russia had endured many setbacks, but Putin had seemingly endless resources to draw upon. As long as there were prisons in Russia, there were recruits for the Wagner Group. And on September 21 Putin declared a huge mobilization, of three hundred thousand men.

Nine days later, he announced that Russia was annexing four Ukrainian oblasts (Donetsk, Luhansk, Kherson, and Zaporizhzhia), after organizing a sham referendum. But the Ukrainians were hardly sitting back. In October and early November, they were pushing the Russians out of the territory they had taken in the spring, with the support of our weapons and intelligence. On November 11, Ukraine took back the city of Kherson. It was a momentous day—



9780316598484_PromiseMeAmerica_int_1P.indd 183 7/17/26 1:51 PM

not least for being the anniversary of the day that World War I ended, in 1918.

We were far from that kind of finality, but it did signal an important pause, as both sides pulled back from the worst of the fighting and settled into a stalemate for the foreseeable future.

Still, it was possible to look back on the last seven months and feel good about America's response to the invasion. Putin had tried his gambit; we had shut him down. Ukraine had astonished the world with its fighting spirit, against a huge and formidable adversary. It felt like democracy — so weakened on January 6 — was staging a comeback.

We had no crystal ball to reveal the future; the situation remained tense. But I felt good about the way we were standing by a friend, and by our principles. I mentioned the Korean War earlier. That was a hard decision for Harry Truman, at a time when he was broadly unpopular and struggling to live up to the mandate of FDR. His secretary of state, Dean Acheson, later described how difficult it was:

> No one could guarantee that a wider war would not come. The crisis was extremely serious. Whether reason would prevail was only partly for us to decide. We should hope and strive for the best while we prepared for the worst. The responsibility for doing this, for showing ourselves as a nation possessed of steadiness, moderation, restraint, constancy of purpose, and inflexibility in action, rested not only on members of the Government and the Congress but on every single American citizen. The nation was merely the sum total of these. It would show itself to the world bearing its ill fortunes and bettering them as its citizens showed themselves. Every individual must understand the forces we were dealing with and the role required of us. No one could dodge that responsibility.[28]



9780316598484_PromiseMeAmerica_int_1P.indd 184 7/17/26 1:51 PM

I liked an idea in that thought—that the strength of a great democracy comes from the people themselves. I saw it firsthand, in a place I knew well. As soon as the war started, Scranton wanted to do its part. The local Ukrainian Americans organized, creating a fund-raising group, Scranton 4 Ukraine, and many other local efforts.[29] St. Vladimir Ukrainian Catholic Church raised hundreds of thousands of dollars to buy materials like bandages, body armor, and food for Ukrainian soldiers.[30]

But it went deeper than that; Scranton was also on the front lines, in a sense. During the Korean War, an old locomotive repair facility in Scranton was repurposed to make steel tubes for artillery shells.[31] In 2022, Scranton was ready again, this time to help Ukraine. The Scranton facility had been making about fourteen thousand of these 155-millimeter shells a month, but when the war started, there was a serious uptick, to roughly thirty-six thousand shells a month.[32] That is about a third of all the shells going to Ukraine. It would be hard to overstate my pride in my birthplace.

Clearly, Putin had failed to achieve most of his objectives as 2022 was ending. Ukraine was not only fighting him to a standstill, it was also more determined than ever to join its destiny with the West. Finland and Sweden, shocked by the invasion, were beginning the process of joining NATO. NATO had bounced back from the ambivalence of the Trump years, with member nations stepping up and paying in, in every sense.

From the bully pulpit, I had done my best to stand up against bullies. Ukraine's refusal to fail had encouraged every other vulnerable nation on earth threatened by a larger neighbor—and Taiwan in particular. The conflict was far from over, but we had averted a catastrophe that would have imperiled every democracy on the planet.



9780316598484_PromiseMeAmerica_int_1P.indd 185 7/17/26 1:51 PM

CHAPTER NINE

# A SEASON OF PROGRESS

As we stood up for democracy in Ukraine, we were also doing everything we could to strengthen it at home. Beyond the American Rescue Plan and the Bipartisan Infrastructure Act, the first two years of my term would prove to be remarkably, even historically, eventful on the domestic front, with substantial victories and progress on women's safety, gun violence prevention, veterans' health, America's competitiveness, and even the process by which the Democratic Party selects its presidential nominees. All of this would occur in the face of unrelenting opposition and an unprecedented decision on abortion rights by the United States Supreme Court.

## VIOLENCE AGAINST WOMEN ACT

In 1990, when I was serving as the chair of the Senate Judiciary Committee, I was struck by data from the Bureau of Justice Statistics that found that violent crimes perpetrated against men had fallen slightly

in the previous ten years but the number of violent crimes against women had trended up. My initial hunch was that maybe because of the women's movement, more women were willing to come forward and report rapes or domestic violence. But as I looked into it, I realized there was a lot more than that going on. In fact, I quickly came to see that violence against women was often culturally accepted, even expected, a belief that was tragically shared by men, women, and children. I remember reading numbers from a survey of middle school children done in Rhode Island. If a man takes a woman out on a date and spends ten dollars on her, one question asked, does he have the right to force sex on her? A quarter of the boys said he did, which stunned me. But the bigger surprise was that a fifth of the girls agreed. This was a big problem, and it was deeply ingrained in our society. I later learned that one in ten American males believed it was okay for a husband to hit his wife if she didn't obey him. That meant millions of women were at risk of being beaten in their own home.

I assigned one of my Judiciary staff people full-time to the problem of violence against women. The result, after much work and many hours of brave testimony from victims, was the original Violence Against Women Act. The law brought the epidemic of violence against women out of the shadows, breaking the dam of congressional and cultural resistance to discussing the issue. It also made it much easier to prosecute offenders, and to provide support for survivors of domestic violence.

It was written in such a way that would require reauthorization every five years. Congress had reauthorized the Violence Against Women Act three times since, but it had lapsed a couple of years before I became president, and so, in my first address to a joint session of Congress, I called on Congress to pass the law "and save some lives."

Every effort to reauthorize the law presented its own challenges, but I had never intended for the law to be static. The sticking point this time had to do with the so-called boyfriend loophole. The existing law said that a spouse convicted of domestic violence couldn't purchase a



9780316508484_PromiseMeAmerica_int_1P.indd 188 7/17/26 1:51 PM

firearm. But it didn't say the same thing about dating partners. This was particularly important as an abusive partner's access to a gun increases the risk that a woman will be murdered fivefold. Republicans and the National Rifle Association were strongly opposed to including that provision.

To get negotiations moving again, Democratic lawmakers dropped that demand, although I hadn't forgotten it. Indeed, the new version of the law included some important changes.

For the first time, VAWA was updated to address online harassment and abuse. This included the creation of a federal civil cause of action for the nonconsensual distribution of intimate images (often referred to as "revenge porn") and local law enforcement grants to help combat cybercrimes. It improved access to emergency housing for victims and made sure that LGBTQ people weren't discriminated against.

My team worked very closely with Senators Lisa Murkowski and Joni Ernst on the Republican side, and Senator Kirsten Gillibrand on the Democratic side of the aisle.

On March 15, 2022, surrounded by advocates, allies, and survivors, I was able to sign a new and expanded law that would protect millions of women from abuse.

## BUFFALO, UVALDE, AND HISTORIC PROGRESS ON GUNS

On May 24, 2022, I was returning from Japan on Air Force One. Most of the staff were asleep, after a successful meeting of a group we called the Quad: the US president along with the prime ministers of India, Japan, and Australia. Jen O'Malley Dillon knocked on the door of my cabin. There had been a terrible school shooting in Texas.

Uvalde was soon to join the ranks of places like Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School in Parkland, Florida. Santa Fe High School in Texas. Oxford High School in Michigan. Four hundred school



9780316598484_PromiseMeAmerica_int_1P.indd 189 7/17/26 1:51 PM

shootings since Columbine, Colorado.[1] At the time, 370,000 students exposed to gun violence. A list of pain and loss that shouldn't exist but instead has only grown.

This was coming just ten days after a white supremacist, radicalized online and livestreaming the massacre, opened fire in a supermarket in Buffalo, New York, killing ten people. And yet already that had faded from the headlines.

I immediately placed a call to Governor Greg Abbott, offering whatever assistance he needed, and told my staff in Washington that I wanted to make a statement upon returning to the White House. I started working on my remarks on the plane.

I began by saying, "I had hoped, when I became president, I would not have to do this again." I spoke of what it is like to lose a child and offered my prayers. But I was also angry. "As a nation, we have to ask: When in God's name are we going to stand up to the gun lobby? When in God's name will we do what we all know in our gut needs to be done? . . . I am sick and tired of it. We have to act. And don't tell me we can't have an impact on this carnage."[2]

Indeed, history showed that we could.

When we passed the assault weapons ban as part of the 1994 crime bill — an addition that risked sinking the entire bill, but that I became adamant about — mass shootings went down. For the average American, the risk of being killed in a mass shooting went down 70 percent. When the law expired a decade later, mass shootings tripled.[3]

Guns had actually been a point of differentiation between Bernie Sanders and me in the 2020 primaries — I was proud of my record of gun control advocacy and legislation. Bernie, representing a more rural state, had voted against many of my efforts. Early in my administration, we introduced a package of executive actions on gun violence — including efforts to address the threat of firearms that could be assembled without serial numbers, or "ghost guns." We would go on to take other actions against machine gun conversion

kits and 3-D-printed guns. I also wanted to make sure there was an understanding that while mass shootings receive a lot of news coverage, the actual number of gun deaths in the United States goes far beyond that. There are effective programs, called community violence intervention, that can dramatically reduce gun crime, so I made sure local leaders knew that the state and local funds from the American Rescue Plan could be spent on police and effective community violence interventions.

This progress we were making was meaningful but incremental, and I hadn't given up on larger goals.

I visited Uvalde on May 29, five days after the shooting. Visiting parents who have lost children was one of the most agonizing parts of my job. However, I feel it is important to show them that the nation shares their grief, and to give them the chance to share a story or a memory of the loved ones they've lost.

Before meeting with the families, Jill and I placed flowers in front of the Robb Elementary School sign, met with some of the local leaders, and attended a Mass where the children from the community were invited to join us up front.

As Jill and I left the church, a crowd had gathered and began shouting out, "Do something!"

"We will," I replied.

We had to turn pain into action.

On June 2, I addressed the nation from the White House. Arrayed behind me were fifty-six candles, to represent the fact that every state and US territory had experienced gun violence. The most recent mass shooting had occurred one day before, in Tulsa, Oklahoma.

I made no secret of the fact that I wanted to reinstate the assault weapons ban and repeal immunity for gun manufacturers. But I was realistic. I said that if an assault weapons ban wasn't in the offing, then we should raise the legal age to purchase. My message to Congress was: I'm giving you the space to find common ground, but send me *something*.



9780316598484_PromiseMeAmerica_int_1P.indd 191 7/17/26 1:51 PM

Senators John Cornyn, a Republican from Texas, and Chris Murphy, a Democrat from Connecticut, were already exploring what might be possible, figuring out areas where they could get to yes.

They succeeded in finding significant areas of agreement.

Their bill expanded background checks for people between the ages of eighteen and twenty-one. This was important because according to one study, people between the ages of eighteen and twenty make up only 4 percent of the population, yet they (mostly men) commit 17 percent of gun homicides.[4]

It encouraged states to pass "red flag laws," to make it easier to remove weapons from people deemed a threat to themselves or others. As attorney general of Delaware, Beau had led the fight for a red flag law, which was named after him when it was enacted in 2018. We were also able to achieve what we hadn't been able to in the VAWA reauthorization and broadened the law to include dating partners.

The National Rifle Association opposed the bill. But within one month of the horrible events in Uvalde, I signed into law the first major gun safety legislation passed by Congress in nearly thirty years. It was a milestone achievement. It also wasn't nearly enough.

## DOBBS

On May 2, 2022, something unprecedented occurred. An entire draft Supreme Court opinion was leaked to the media. An explosive decision. *Dobbs v. Jackson Women's Health Organization*. The draft was clear. The Supreme Court was ready to take away a woman's right to choose. Was the motive of the leaker to spike this misguided decision, or to lock it in? We'll never know. And at the time, we didn't know if this actually was the real decision. But I called Jen Klein, the director of my Gender Policy Council, and Dana Remus, my White House counsel, to outline the options for executive action.

On June 7, we held a large meeting in the Roosevelt Room of the White House. Jen Klein, Dana Remus, Neera Tanden, Bruce Reed,

Ron Klain, and Mike Donilon gathered around the table, and Kamala Harris joined by Zoom. I was furious. Furious about the insufficiency of my options, furious that the court had allowed itself to become so political. I just hoped that the leaked opinion wasn't going to be the real opinion, because if it was, it was clear that this would be fully solved only by federal legislation.

On June 24, we learned that the leaked opinion was, with only slight modifications, the court's opinion. The decision undid fifty years of jurisprudence over one of the most contested issues in America: a woman's right to choose. It ignored *stare decisis*, the foundational legal doctrine that the court should follow historical precedent when deciding similar cases. It violated one of the fundamental practices that had long governed Supreme Court decisions: Decide the issue in front of you. But that's not what the court did.

I found it especially troubling since I had served as chair of the Senate Judiciary Committee. With the possible exception of my friend Senator Pat Leahy, I had overseen more Supreme Court nominations than anyone in history. So, more than most, I knew the assurances that these justices on the court had given that they wouldn't overturn *Roe v. Wade*—in private and in public. The justices who voted to overturn *Roe* in the *Dobbs* case had led senators to believe during their confirmation hearings that they wouldn't do it.

Indeed, two of the justices whose hearings I had chaired were on the court: Stephen Breyer and Clarence Thomas. I've written previously about my role in Justice Thomas's contentious hearing, but it's worth remembering that in his 1991 confirmation hearing, he testified, under oath, that he believed the Constitution protected a right to privacy. He described being personally pained at the thought of women being forced to seek out dangerous, illegal abortions.[5]

Stephen Breyer, by contrast, had offered what I thought was one of the most important warnings to his fellow justices during the oral arguments phase of the *Dobbs* case: "It is particularly important to show what we do in overturning a case is grounded in principle and



9780316598484_PromiseMeAmerica_int_1P.indd 193 7/17/26 1:51 PM

not social pressure, not political pressure . . . The problem with a super case like this, the rare case, the watershed case, where people are really opposed on both sides and they really fight each other, is they're going to be ready to say, 'No, you're just political, you're just politicians.' And that's what kills us as an American institution."[6]

It was, sadly, not a case decided on the law or the Constitution. It felt, in Breyer's words, "just political." I was disappointed in how completely Chief Justice Roberts had lost control of the court.

Breyer's words were prophetic: The popularity of the Supreme Court plummeted in the aftermath. It was dangerous, in a country as closely divided as our own, to have the law interpreted by an arrogant court that was dismissive of democratic norms and out of step with the will of the people.[7]

As a practicing Catholic, I'm an unlikely defender of abortion. It's not something I approve of personally. But as a public official, I had come to the conclusion years ago that my faith shouldn't dictate the personal choices others made in their lives. I thought *Roe* had gotten the balance right, carefully mediating between a woman's right to choose, earlier in her pregnancy, and the state's ability to regulate later in her pregnancy. Since 1973, most Americans had agreed with its principles, and that included people from all faiths and backgrounds. That national consensus was important, and it had deepened with time.

*Roe* was originally a 7–2 decision handed down under a Republican president, Richard Nixon. And justices appointed by four Republican presidents had continued to uphold it. But now three justices appointed by Donald Trump had moved as a bloc alongside Justices Clarence Thomas and Samuel Alito to eliminate the right. It was the culmination of a deliberate effort over decades to upset the balance of our law. It prioritized an extreme ideology over the rights of women. It undermined the credibility of a Supreme Court that was edging ever closer to the fringe. Most important, it put women in real danger. Pregnant women experiencing emergencies were already being turned away or improperly treated at emergency



9780316598484_PromiseMeAmerica_int_1P.indd 194 7/17/26 1:51 PM

rooms. This decision was killing women. There's no other way to put it.

This left the question of how to respond. Within two weeks, I issued an executive order directing the Department of Health and Human Services to expand access to medication abortion (mifepristone) and emergency contraception, and to ensure that pregnant patients got appropriate emergency care.

I would follow that with other executive orders to ensure patients could not be denied health care because of pregnancy status. Each order unleashed a set of policies — on medication abortion; access to emergency abortion care; access to contraception; fertility care including IVF; safeguarding the privacy of patients and health care providers; and protecting access to reproductive health care for veterans and service members.

These efforts were aimed at mitigating the impact of the decision, but the reality was that my powers in this case were limited. Change would come, as it must, from the voters.

In announcing the executive orders, I made clear that *Roe* was on the ballot. Indeed, I ended my remarks by saying: "There's an election in November. Vote, vote, vote, vote."[8] Vice President Harris was particularly forceful and effective in defining the stakes. She pointedly made the case that *Dobbs* called into question other "right to privacy" issues, such as birth control, interracial marriage, and same-sex marriage. And she summed it up in three powerful words: "How dare they?"[9]

Come November, voters in states across America would make their unhappiness with *Dobbs* abundantly clear, bucking historical trends by adding to our Senate majority, passing ballot referenda, and flipping state legislatures.

## THE CHIPS AND SCIENCE ACT

For me, building bridges wasn't just a metaphor; we were doing all we could to build real bridges too — along with roads, highways, ports,



9780316598484_PromiseMeAmerica_int_1P.indd 195 7/17/26 1:51 PM

airports, water systems, electricity, and broadband. Mitch Landrieu was working feverishly to get funding out the door to shovel-ready projects, and as a result, the Bipartisan Infrastructure Act was beginning to create thousands of jobs around the country.

Once the Bipartisan Infrastructure Bill had been separated, my team started pushing the remaining portions of my Build Back Better Plan through Congress. In addition to childcare, health care subsidies, lower prices for prescription drugs, and other key provisions, the bill included significant new clean energy provisions that Senator Ron Wyden of Oregon had won support for in the Finance Committee.[10]

We were making progress, listening to all parties, moving the ball downfield. On November 19, 2021, four days after I signed the Bipartisan Infrastructure Act, the House had approved the Build Back Better Act, 220–213, with only one Democrat, Maine Representative Jared Golden, opposing it.

The Senate, the institution I loved, the place where I had served for so long, would once again be the hurdle. And one senator in particular.

In December, I spoke to Joe Manchin many times about his concerns relating to the child tax credit, which was about to expire. I tried to explain how effective it had been in reducing child poverty. I thought we'd reached an agreement. Then, on December 19, Joe went on *Fox News Sunday* to announce, "I cannot vote for it." That was it: Build Back Better was dead.

Many Democrats were furious with him, calling him, among less repeatable names, the grinch who stole Christmas.

Members of my staff were furious with him, including my chief of staff, Ron Klain, who assembled a statement laying the failure of the bill at Manchin's feet, accusing him of "a sudden and inexplicable reversal" and "a breach of his commitments."[11] I tend not to air my frustrations or wage my battles in the press, but in this instance, I had simply had it.



9780316598484_PromiseMeAmerica_int_1P.indd 196 7/17/26 1:51 PM

The breach was now wide open, and out in the open. It would take time and effort to heal. Everyone needed a cooling-off period.

It was clear that without Manchin's support, we couldn't get Build Back Better through the Senate in 2021. We decided to shift gears and try again in 2022.

In the meantime, there was no shortage of other work to be done. COVID had exposed significant areas of national vulnerability. When we suddenly needed a product in huge quantities — masks, for example — it was not easy to manufacture enough of them at first. I did not want the United States reliant on other nations for essential needs. In particular, I didn't want us reliant on nations that weren't necessarily strong allies, or allies at all, or that could be threatened by our enemies.

There is perhaps no industry more essential to our nation's long-term success and security than semiconductors, the chips that serve as the brains of our phones and laptops, cars, planes, medical equipment, electric grids, weaponry, and just about every device in the twenty-first-century tool kit.

For context, a modern car contains upward of one thousand semiconductor chips. The smartphone in your hand contains hundreds. Appliances you wouldn't think of as being high tech, like washing machines and dishwashers, contain dozens.

This rise of semiconductors is a triumph of American ingenuity. They were invented in the United States, and until the 1980s, a majority of the world's chips were manufactured here. By 2020, we were producing only 12 percent of the world's supply.[12]

Indeed, the United States had become uncomfortably dependent on a single producer, in a distant part of the world: the Taiwan Semiconductor Manufacturing Company, or TSMC. Luckily, TSMC is located on the island of Taiwan, ruled by a friendly democracy, the Republic of China, with long-standing ties to the United States. But Taiwan is also exposed to considerable vulnerability, adjacent to a huge neighbor, the People's Republic of China, that often talks of its



9780316598484_PromiseMeAmerica_int_1P.indd 197 7/17/26 1:51 PM

ambition to reunite the "two Chinas." If China succeeded in invading Taiwan, following Putin's example, it would be an incalculable setback to American strategic interests, and to the cause of democracy worldwide. It would also deal us a serious economic blow.

This had been an area of focus of mine for a while. On February 24, a month into my presidency, Vice President Harris and I convened a large bipartisan meeting that included Senators John Cornyn, Mark Warner, and Todd Young. I asked them for an update on semiconductors. I pushed them on how critical it was, for both our economy and our national security, that we gain ground in this sector.

Semiconductors were one piece of a larger story. The United States once led all nations in research and development, but according to the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development, by the time I came into office, we had fallen to ninth place.[13] Most troublingly, we were losing to China, which had dramatically increased its spending. Since 2015, it had carried out a "Made in China 2025" strategy to catch up to or surpass the West in most technologies.

As I said repeatedly, we were in a competition to win the twenty-first century, and "the starting gun has gone off."[14]

Congressional leaders had been working on ways to protect this vital supply chain and shore up chip production at home.

In May 2020, Senators Chuck Schumer and Todd Young had introduced the bipartisan Endless Frontier Act to protect the supply chain, create regional tech hubs in the United States, and support top-shelf scientific research in AI and quantum computing, a bill that they then updated the next year. In June, another bipartisan pair of senators, Mark Warner and John Cornyn, introduced the CHIPS for America Act (with CHIPS standing for Creating Helpful Incentives to Produce Semiconductors), to stimulate greater production of semiconductors in the United States. Similar bills were also proposed in the House.

The updated Schumer/Young bill easily passed the Senate, 68–32, with bipartisan support, on June 8, 2021, and we were off to the races.



9780316598484_PromiseMeAmerica_int_1P.indd 198 7/17/26 1:51 PM

Or so we thought. The House took longer, but a companion bill finally passed on February 4, 2022. Then some more time was required for the Senate and House to work out the differences between the two bills. By spring, we were getting close, and the unified bill had a new name, the CHIPS and Science Act.

By this time, of course, the war in Ukraine had broken out, and that focused our thinking. Every weapon system relied on semiconductors, and we obviously needed to keep the most advanced chips from falling into Russian and Chinese hands. It did not escape our notice, either, that China had committed more than a trillion dollars to its own semiconductor industry over the next decade.[15]

As the details of the CHIPS and Science Act became clear over the spring of 2022, it was impressive to see Republicans and Democrats coming together once more. And we could tell how anxious China was about the bill's provisions, as their emissaries and proxies lobbied intensively against it, for fear that it would allow us to increase our tech advantage and, by extension, our military superiority.[16]

In May, as I mentioned, I made an official visit to South Korea and Japan. When we landed in South Korea, our first stop was the Samsung Electronics Pyeongtaek campus. It was an enormous semiconductor foundry. I remember standing, staring up at this gargantuan facility, and saying to Secretary Raimondo: "This is what we need in America. How do we build this in the United States?" She replied, "When we get the CHIPS Act passed, we will."

The CHIPS and Science Act passed the Senate on July 27; then the House the next day. Each vote was by a comfortable margin. It was a true bipartisan triumph.

I was thrilled. As we reclaimed our leadership in semiconductors, we were also investing in the mechanics of democracy. We were protecting our national security and competing to win the race to define a future built around artificial intelligence. We were working with our friends — especially Japan and Taiwan — to build state-of-the-art fabrication facilities, or "fabs," here in the United States, where we



9780316598484_PromiseMeAmerica_int_1P.indd 199 7/17/26 1:51 PM

could make semiconductors on our own soil. As of this writing, tens of thousands of jobs are being created.

It was a great result for all Americans. The fabs are being built in red states as well as blue ones. I attended the groundbreaking of a new fab on the outskirts of Columbus, Ohio, on September 9, 2022. The so-called Field of Dreams was a $20 billion campus, built by Intel, that would soon transform the region. It felt fitting that Ohio — home to the Wright brothers, John Glenn, and Neil Armstrong — would once again be a leading site of innovation and research into the most exciting technologies of the future.[17]

This was a big deal to me, personally, as well. I had grown up watching the steel and coal industries die in Scranton, and I knew what it meant to a proud community to find its way back to the cutting edge. I was excited for Ohio, and for Texas (where Samsung was building a $17 billion semiconductor factory just like the one I had seen in Korea), and for Indiana (where Purdue University announced an engineering degree in semiconductors), and for Idaho (where Micron Tehcnology announced plans for a $15 billion fab), and for every other state that would be tied to a future built by American ingenuity and the semiconductor.[18]

I was also happy to see all the ways in which the CHIPS and Science Act would get Americans feeling excited about science again. It allocated funding to strengthen STEM education in schools around the country (particularly in rural areas). It strengthened NASA by authorizing funds for the International Space Station, and for the Artemis program to return humans to the moon, and for deep study of the question of how to bring humans to Mars someday.

Investments in science and discovery pay substantial dividends. Fulfilling President Kennedy's 1962 charge to put a man on the moon incurred mind-boggling costs and dangers. But it also set Americans on a course of scientific thinking that led to American leadership in computing, aerospace, software development, and hundreds of other new fields.[19] By one measure, the original cost of the Apollo program,



9780316598484_PromiseMeAmerica_int_1P.indd 200 7/17/26 1:51 PM

roughly $140 billion in today's dollars, led to $4.1 trillion in annually recurring benefits.[20]

It would take time to measure the long-term effects of the CHIPS and Science Act, but I felt that we had once again put the world on notice that America was back.

## THE INFLATION REDUCTION ACT

Success has a way of begetting success. Since the collapse of the Build Back Better bill the previous year, I had been quietly rebuilding my relationship with Joe Manchin, as had my chief of staff, Ron Klain. That mending of fences was orchestrated by Gina Raimondo, who invited Joe Manchin and Ron over to her house for dinner. At some point during the four-hour meal, Gina said to both of them: "Listen, I brought you here because I like you both and I think you have more in common than you realize. You're both very smart, you both care about the country. I'd like you to bury the hatchet." In Gina's telling, Ron apologized to Senator Manchin, and Joe said, "Apology accepted."

I asked Gina what miraculous menu was able to achieve such a breakthrough. She said, "I'm Italian, Joe's Italian; I had to go with homemade eggplant parmesan and roast pork, with cannoli for dessert." The progress may have also been accelerated by Gina's son Tommy, who had done some research and found Joe's favorite brand of Scotch.

After that, Joe indicated to Chuck Schumer that he was ready to come back to the negotiating table.

And it was clear to us that, once he was there, we couldn't force-feed him something he didn't want to eat. Indeed, we did two things. First, we worked to better understand what he most cared about and what his red lines were. I dispatched Brian Deese to spend a day with Joe in West Virginia, touring sites and talking policy. Brian was both a sophisticated economic thinker and someone who could "speak English" — who could help explain the policies we were



9780316598484_PromiseMeAmerica_int_1P.indd 201 7/17/26 1:51 PM

proposing — and had developed a good working relationship with Joe. Brian reported back that the senator also took him zip-lining.

At the same time, we also gave Senator Manchin space to work with Senator Schumer on an agreement that focused on two major pillars from the original Build Back Better bill: energy and climate, and health care savings. Specifically, Senator Manchin was willing to allow Medicare to negotiate lower prescription drug prices, something that had been a goal for years but had constantly been blocked by the wealthy and powerful pharmaceutical companies.

The new framework meant that some key priorities had to be left behind — we essentially had to clear the decks of any element that could not get fifty votes in the Senate. Several major components of my original Build Back Better framework had to be dropped, including some that I felt would be important and transformative. These included free community college, universal pre-K for three- and four-year-olds, an expanded child tax credit, and paid parental leave.

I still believe that all of these things would make us a more prosperous nation, ease pressure on overstretched families, and demonstrate that if we out-educate other countries, we will outcompete them as well.

I also feel strongly that our politics today allows too little room for compromise. I think our system works best when you achieve what you can and then make your case to the voters about what you want to achieve next.

This bill, too, was not without its hiccups and false starts. On July 14, Senator Manchin said that he would not negotiate any further; four days later, he had a change of heart and indicated he was willing to enter negotiations. It was great news for us as it gave us confidence that we could pass a major reconciliation act; this one would come to be known as the Inflation Reduction Act. But it created a challenge. I recognized that if Senator McConnell believed that another bill was moving forward via reconciliation, he would grind the legislative gears to a halt and not let the CHIPS Act pass. We desperately wanted to get both



9780316598484_PromiseMeAmerica_int_1P.indd 202 7/17/26 1:51 PM

bills passed, but if we showed momentum on reconciliation, it could undermine the CHIPS Act. Indeed, Mitch McConnell had explicitly vowed to withhold Republican support for the CHIPS bill if Democrats insisted on pushing forward with the climate and energy programs that were key to our reconciliation bill.[21] And if Mitch McConnell was able to slow the CHIPS Act down, it also would mean more time for Joe Manchin to second-guess his commitment to that reconciliation bill. Getting both done would be a high-wire legislative act.

What transpired over those next two weeks was one of the rarest things in Washington: a secret that actually was kept. Over that period, the number of people who knew that Senators Manchin and Schumer were quietly working to finalize the reconciliation bill could be counted on a single hand. Even inside the White House, I directed that we operate in the smallest circle, allowing most of the staff to believe that reconciliation was dead. That was necessary so that we could advance the ball on the CHIPS Act and get it through the critical vote in the Senate.

On July 27, only hours after the Senate passed the CHIPS and Science Act, Senators Manchin and Schumer announced their agreement toward an enormous reconciliation bill, the Inflation Reduction Act. It passed the Senate on August 7, and I signed it into law nine days later.

Senator McConnell was not happy with the outcome; he felt he had been misled and outmaneuvered. He took plenty of heat from his own party. That said, his interactions with me were more in the vein of grudging respect, because he knew — and he knew that I knew — what is required to get legislation done. You build coalitions, you maximize your leverage, you pass the bills you can pass. In this case, in the deep doldrums of late summer of 2022, we had gone 2–0 on historic legislation. It was a remarkable burst of activity, and it put us in a strong position as we headed into fall and the election season.

When the dust settled, it was clear just how big a deal the Inflation Reduction Act was. It would authorize $891 billion in total spending,



9780316598484_PromiseMeAmerica_int_1P.indd 203 7/17/26 1:51 PM

including $783 billion on energy and climate measures.[22] It was projected to reduce greenhouse gas emissions by 40 percent by 2030.[23] That would help us to set the right example. We tried to persuade other countries — notably China, the world's leading emitter — to do the same. It wasn't simply the right thing to do, if we want our children to inherit a world as full of promise as the one we inherited. It was another example of telling the truth. The science is absolutely clear. The costs of inaction are vastly greater than the costs of action and would condemn our children and grandchildren to a grim fate that we can easily avoid. To oversee the clean energy aspects of the Inflation Reduction Act, I named John Podesta, asking him to work with Ali Zaidi, my climate adviser, to ensure that the climate benefits of the bill would be fully realized.

The Inflation Reduction Act was also about basic fairness and helped us to get over another hurdle in my decades-long effort to push back against the false god of trickle-down economics. The system had been stacked against working families, and in favor of corporations and their lobbyists, ever since the Reagan Revolution of the 1980s. The Inflation Reduction Act did just the opposite. It included a major promise of my campaign: a 15 percent minimum tax on major corporations. In 2020, fifty-five of the largest corporations in America had paid no federal income tax. Not one dime. Now they would finally have to pay their share. Moreover, the new law provided the IRS with the resources to go after wealthy scofflaws who found ways to dodge paying the federal tax they owed — an act of disloyalty to the country that made their wealth possible. Together, these provisions went a long way toward making the Inflation Reduction Act pay for itself.[24]

In the space of two weeks, I had signed two major pieces of legislation. As journalists Christopher Cadelago and Jonathan Lemire put it, writing in *Politico*, "Joe Biden has never had a more productive stretch of his presidency, with wins stacking atop wins at a most opportune time."[25]



9780316598484_PromiseMeAmerica_int_1P.indd 204 7/17/26 1:51 PM

I have never been one for spiking the ball. However, for several months, the MAGA crowd had been using "Let's go, Brandon" as a euphemistic way of cursing me. It started after a NASCAR race that was won by Brandon Brown. As Brown was being interviewed after the race, a profane chant about me started up behind him. The interviewer misheard it as the crowd chanting, "Let's go, Brandon." The interview went viral. This then led to a second meme, which co-opted some MAGA imagery to show me represented by a dark alter ego with red lasers for eyes, imposing my will upon legislation and world events: Dark Brandon. In this new digital age, I had traded my aviators for lasers, and the internet seemed to be enjoying it. My director of digital strategy, Rob Flaherty, decided to embrace it and posted, "Dark Brandon is crushing it." The real Joe Biden agreed.

## PACT ACT

I have always maintained that the United States has one sacred obligation: to properly equip those we send into harm's way, and to care for them and their families when they return home.

For several years, it had been clear that an unexpected harm was following our troops home. At many US military installations, burn pits are used to dispose of human waste, fuel, spent batteries, and other refuse. At some installations, these are huge fires that burn constantly, 24-7. The soldiers who worked or lived close to them, or who were regularly exposed to them, seemed to be suffering from a variety of ailments: headaches, numbness, dizziness, and cancers. By 2018, over 125,000 veterans had enrolled in a burn pit registry that had been created at the Department of Veterans Affairs in 2014.

I had also learned that there may have been a personal dimension of this for me. A book about the burn pits had recently been published, noting that during his time in both Iraq and Kosovo, Beau was working in close proximity to burn pits.[26] This was news to me, and while we'll never know for sure, I thought it possible that if a previously



9780316598484_PromiseMeAmerica_int_1P.indd 205 7/17/26 1:51 PM

healthy forty-four-year-old was diagnosed with cancer, exposure to elevated levels of carcinogens might have something to do with it. I downplayed that suspicion for fear of it appearing that my motives were personal in some way. The truth was that I didn't want other vets to suffer the same way he had.

My secretary of veterans affairs was Denis McDonough, whom I had come to admire in the Obama administration for his competence, clarity, and decency. When I called him to say that I wanted to nominate him for the job, I told him, "The job description is very simple. Your job is to fight like hell for vets." And he did. Often at events, I would run into veterans who asked about a benefits issue, and I would call Denis to get it fixed.

This was something larger we had to fix. I had already asked Denis to get the VA working on new ways of linking toxic exposures to diseases, to help more veterans get benefits, and to expand eligibility to veterans suffering from respiratory cancers.

In my first State of the Union, in 2022, I described a "unity agenda" — a series of initiatives that I felt could be easily and widely embraced by even the most divided Congress. My unity agenda included progress on the opioid epidemic, mental health, and ending cancer as we know it. It also included the passage of a law to make sure veterans devastated by toxic exposures in Iraq and Afghanistan finally got the benefits and comprehensive health care they deserved.

Indeed, Senators Jon Tester and Jerry Moran had been hard at work on such a law — the Heath Robinson Honoring Our Promise to Address Comprehensive Toxics (PACT) Act — named for Sergeant First Class Heath Robinson, who served in Iraq only to later die in 2020 after battling lung cancer. The act authorized $797 billion in health care and disability benefits to take care of our veterans who were exposed to toxic substances during their service, particularly from burn pits.[27]

It was a good bill, but there were three major changes I wanted to see:



9780316598484_PromiseMeAmerica_int_1P.indd 206 7/17/26 1:51 PM

I wanted veterans with terminal cancer to be made eligible for their benefits immediately upon passage. This gave a lot of veterans and families some peace of mind that, if they passed, their benefits would not get caught up in VA red tape.

Partially to avoid budget concerns, the law had been written to make different generations of veterans eligible at different times. For example, Vietnam-era veterans with hypertension would become eligible in 2029, which was nonsensical given that, actuarily speaking, many would not expect to live that long. So I demanded that we make all veterans eligible at the earliest possible date.

I also knew that the implementation of the law would be workforce intensive. During the Obama administration, we had changed the rules to say that any veteran who had served in combat anywhere in Central Command who suffered PTSD had a "presumption of service connection." In other words, the default switch was set to their receiving the benefits, rather than having those benefits denied. This had the effect of making many more veterans eligible for benefits, which led to a backlog of applications. So I insisted that Congress include additional hiring authority in the law, allowing us to increase the VA workforce so that vets would not have to wait for a smaller VA workforce to process their claims.

The law had the support of every major veterans organization. It also had the vocal support of Jon Stewart, the comedian and writer, who had been a vocal champion of the firefighters and first responders who had been exposed to toxins while working around the smoldering rubble of the World Trade Center.

It seemed a sure bet until early July, when Senator Pat Toomey threatened a filibuster of the bill because of a provision that ensured that the cost of executing the law would not come at the expense of other VA programs and other nondefense programs. This provision, called the Cost of War Toxic Exposure Fund, said that any additional expenditures to implement this law would be deemed mandatory rather than discretionary. To me, this was as it should be. The costs



9780316598484_PromiseMeAmerica_int_1P.indd 207 7/17/26 1:51 PM

of implementing the law were, quite profoundly, a cost of war. Our nation should pay the full costs of war. Which, by the way, is another reason presidents should think through all the ramifications before entering a war.

Senator Toomey's goal was to keep the Senate from passing the bill before they left town for their August vacations. What he didn't count on was that America's fighting men and women were also pretty good at fighting for a piece of legislation.

Several dozen veterans made their way to Washington and began camping out at the Capitol Building, raising visibility and support for the bill. Their numbers grew as they expected to be there to celebrate the bill's passage.

On July 29, despite the PACT Act's widespread support, Senate Republicans blocked its progress in a procedural motion. Twenty-two of them who had previously expressed support for it now voted against it.[28]

Our sense was that this was political retaliation by Republicans for our progress on the Inflation Reduction Act, which we were getting ready to pass without their votes. If that was the reason — and indeed, it was the only one that made any sense — it was, as I said at the time, despicable. Jon Tester was incensed. Jon Stewart said that he was used to hypocrisy, but this was a level of cruelty even he didn't anticipate.

I thought that if I visited the gathered veterans in person, it would raise more awareness for the bill and put more pressure on Republicans. The previous week, on July 21, I had tested positive for COVID. The symptoms were mild, but I felt that I had to practice what I was preaching, and isolate, which I had done for five days. The day of my planned visit, July 30, I was ready to go stand in solidarity with the veterans before again testing positive, with a rebound case of the virus.

I called Denis and told him I couldn't get to the Hill. So I asked if he'd bring the veterans pizza on my behalf and FaceTime me when he



9780316598484_PromiseMeAmerica_int_1P.indd 208 7/17/26 1:51 PM

got up there. These veterans had delivered for us; the least we could do was deliver for them, and not just pizza.

Thanks to the veterans' relentless advocacy efforts, the PACT Act ultimately passed overwhelmingly and headed to the White House for my signature.

At the bill signing, I asked Heath Robinson's six-year-old daughter, Brielle, to stand next to me. Her mother, Heath's widow, Danielle, stood behind her. I handed Brielle the pen I'd used to sign the bill and told her I wanted her to know that we would never forget the thousands of brave men and women who sacrificed for this country.

Afterward, I brought Brielle and some other family members into the Oval Office. Brielle left me a note: "Thank you Mr. President for being so nice to us. Love, Brielle." I had that note framed and kept it on the credenza behind the Resolute Desk for the rest of my time in office.

## MIDTERMS

I was juggling a lot in the months leading up to the midterm elections; running an international military coalition while trying to complete our recovery from the pandemic, strengthen the economy, and drive some very big bills through Congress relating to our long-term future.

Even if I wasn't on the ballot, many of my friends were, and in a sense, it was a national referendum on the ideas we had put forward and the progress we had made. Midterm elections are traditionally unkind to the party of the sitting president. In 2010, Democrats lost sixty-three House seats and six seats in the Senate. In 2018, Republicans lost forty seats in the House. I thought we might face another correction, simply because we had achieved so much, so quickly. A fast pace of change can sometimes be troubling to voters, and with only a slender majority, we had passed the American Rescue Plan, the Bipartisan Infrastructure Act, the CHIPS and Science Act, the PACT Act, and the Inflation Reduction Act, among others.



9780316598484_PromiseMeAmerica_int_1P.indd 209 7/17/26 1:51 PM

We still had a closely divided country, and a determined opposition. Donald Trump had never stopped spewing falsehoods about the 2020 election. When I became president, the Senate minority leader, Mitch McConnell, had welcomed me back to Washington with a frosty statement: "One hundred percent of our focus is on stopping this new administration."[29] And Mitch was a friend!

Potentially compounding all of this was the fact that less than two years after January 6, there were still signs of anxiety and mistrust around the simple act of voting. In some places, MAGA extremists once again came out of the shadows to protest a vote, even before it had happened. Armed vigilantes stood near drop boxes in Arizona, and conspiracy theorists made false claims about voting machines, absentee ballots, and early voting. Even though Donald Trump's claims from 2020 had been conclusively refuted, the damage was still evident, as election skeptics did their best to undermine confidence with lawsuits and general intimidation around the voting booth. Tens of thousands of voter registrations were challenged in Georgia in 2022.[30] Many alarming messages were sent to voting officials — the frontline workers who allow our democracy to function.

Around the country, threatening groups filmed innocent voters, as if they were committing a crime, and took down their license plates. That made voting harder than it needed to be. So did the Republican refusal to support the measures we had put forward to make voting easier and more transparent, including the For the People Act and the John R. Lewis Voting Rights Advancement Act. The combined pressure of these tactics — the armed vigilantes and the threats to officials and the lawsuits to slow the counting of ballots — was specifically designed to drive voters away from the polls.

From the beginning of my presidency, I had declared shoring up democracy a major goal. So I hit the road to explain the threats we faced, at home and abroad, and why our defense of democracy in Ukraine was intimately connected to the survival of democracy at



9780316598484_PromiseMeAmerica_int_1P.indd 210 7/17/26 1:51 PM

home. I wasn't coming late to this issue. I had made the preservation of democracy central to my presidency.

On September 1, I went to Independence Hall in Philadelphia to speak to the threat that our democracy faced. I said that the MAGA wing of the Republican Party had no interest in honoring the outcome of our elections, our Constitution, or the rule of law. But I said it was within our power to stop this assault on our democracy and to stand up for the values that had long defined our nation. We were at an inflection point. We could be a nation of hope and unity and optimism, or a nation of fear, division, and darkness.

I knew that the vast majority of citizens rejected violence as a political tool, and yet a week before the election, Nancy Pelosi's husband, Paul, an eighty-two-year-old man, was brutally attacked in his home by a deranged man who had embraced many of the right's conspiracy theories, including the Pizzagate delusion of 2016, and the myth of a stolen election in 2020.[31]

In the final days leading up to the November midterms, I decided I would give another major speech on democracy at Union Station in Washington, DC. We were seeing election deniers on ballots running for offices across the country, including the very offices that supervise elections. If they won, it would have had major repercussions for free and fair elections for years to come. In a very real way, democracy was on the ballot.[32]

It was not a speech that many political insiders wanted me to give. Faiz Shakir, Bernie Sanders's 2020 campaign manager, said on *Meet the Press Now* that if I had designs on giving a speech on democracy, he hoped I was "rewriting it and focusing on the cost of living."[33] David Axelrod, the chief strategist for both of Barack Obama's presidential campaigns, tweeted, "As a matter of practical politics, I doubt many Ds in marginal races are eager for [Biden] to be on TV tonight."[34] Peter Baker wrote in *The New York Times* that I was pointlessly debating with people who had decided that other things mattered



9780316598484_PromiseMeAmerica_int_1P.indd 211 7/17/26 1:51 PM

more: "Mr. Biden seemed almost to be arguing with those voters who were not, in his view, prioritizing election legitimacy highly enough. Medicare, Social Security and the other issues were important, he said, 'but there's something else at stake: democracy itself.'"[35]

But I was not to be deterred. At Union Station, I said the upcoming midterms were a defining moment for the nation: We were fighting for our democracy. Every generation of Americans had faced a moment when democracy was at risk. And this was ours. We, the people, could sustain a republic in which reality was accepted, the law was obeyed, and a vote was truly sacred. Or we could simply stay home, afraid to get into trouble.

These two speeches, at Independence Hall and Union Station, were among a handful I gave on democracy over the course of my presidency. A year later, in September 2023, I would go to the dedication of the John McCain Library in Arizona to continue to make my case. As I said that day:

> Democracy means rule of the people, not rule of monarchs, not rule of the monied, not rule of the mighty. Regardless of party, that means respecting free and fair elections; accepting the outcome, win or lose. It means you can't love your country only when you win.
>
> Democracy means rejecting and repudiating political violence . . . It's undemocratic, and it must never be normalized to advance political power.
>
> And democracy means respecting the institutions that govern a free society.[36]

The Red Wave never arrived. In the end, we lost nine seats in the House, which was enough to give the Republicans control. That was a setback, to be sure, and I would miss Nancy Pelosi's leadership as speaker. She had effectively parried the Republicans, and Donald Trump in particular, since the 2018 midterms gave Democrats the House.



9780316598484_PromiseMeAmerica_int_1P.indd 212 7/17/26 1:51 PM

But we gained a seat in the Senate, and we picked up two Democratic governors. In several divided states — Pennsylvania, Michigan, and Minnesota — we flipped chambers of the legislature. In Pennsylvania, John Fetterman's defeat of Mehmet Oz in a Senate race was a particular rebuke of Trumpism. It was the best midterm result for an incumbent president since JFK. In a press conference, I called it "a good day for democracy."[37]

The election was widely interpreted as a confirmation that the people liked what we were doing. And why not? We had shown that, contrary to China and Russia's claims, the world's democracies were not asleep at the wheel. We had created ten million jobs, with millions more to come.[38] We had trusted science and were in full recovery from the pandemic. We had given manufacturing a shot in the arm and strengthened America's lead in the key technologies of the future. We had reached across the aisle, to show our Republican colleagues that we wanted to work with them. With their help, we had passed far-ranging legislation. It felt like politics was working again.

A close reading of the midterm results showed that Americans remained stubbornly themselves, and difficult to pigeonhole. Some blue states (New York, for example) were moving rightward, and Latino voters, historically Democratic, were voting Republican in larger numbers. But many red states were showing surprises of their own. Nebraska and Montana increased the minimum wage. South Dakota expanded Medicaid coverage. Referenda to beat back abortion restrictions or expand abortion access were passed in Kansas, Kentucky, Michigan, and Montana — *Roe* really was on the ballot, and voters responded.[39]

## RESPECT FOR MARRIAGE ACT

The Supreme Court's willingness to brazenly overturn established precedents like *Roe v. Wade* meant that other precedents like *Obergefell v. Hodges* (which protected marriage equality) and *Loving v.*



9780316598484_PromiseMeAmerica_int_1P.indd 213 7/17/26 1:51 PM

*Virginia* (which struck down laws banning interracial marriage) were also at risk.

Indeed, in his concurring opinion in *Dobbs,* Clarence Thomas said as much, writing that the court "should reconsider all of this Court's substantive due process precedents, including *Griswold, Lawrence,* and *Obergefell.*"[40] These cases spoke directly to Americans' fundamental rights to privacy, due process, and even equal protection.

Back in 2012, in the midst of a tight reelection campaign, I had gotten in a bit of trouble when, in an interview on *Meet the Press,* I said that I was "absolutely comfortable" with same-sex marriage. This was at a time when the Obama administration's official position on the issue wasn't yet established. That statement served as a political catalyst, and President Obama announced his support for same-sex marriage shortly afterward.

Marriage, I had come to see, was a simple proposition: Who do you love, and will you be loyal to that person you love? It's not more complicated than that.

When the Supreme Court put that proposition at risk, they made it abundantly clear that same-sex and interracial marriage would need new federal protections. Specifically, it would need the Respect for Marriage Act, a bill that would ensure federal recognition of same-sex and interracial marriages and require that states recognize valid marriages performed in other states.

We got to work with leaders in the House like Nancy Pelosi, for whom equality and dignity for the LGBT community has always been a guiding star, as well as Representatives Jerry Nadler, who first introduced a version of the Respect for Marriage Act more than a decade earlier, and David Cicilline and Sharice Davids, leaders of the Congressional Equality Caucus. In the Senate, we found champions in Tammy Baldwin, Susan Collins, Dianne Feinstein, Kyrsten Sinema, Rob Portman, Thom Tillis, and Cory Booker.

Thanks to their work, thirty-nine Republicans in the House and twelve in the Senate joined every Democrat in voting in support of it.



9780316598484_PromiseMeAmerica_int_1P.indd 214 7/17/26 1:51 PM

On a sunny and mild December 13, 2022, I signed the bill on the South Lawn of the White House. It was a joyful ceremony that included many of the sixteen plaintiffs from the original same-sex marriage case that set the national conversation in motion, as well as performances from Grammy-winning performers Sam Smith and Cyndi Lauper.

In signing the bill, I also wanted to make a larger point. As I said that day, "Racism, anti-Semitism, homophobia, transphobia — they're all connected. But the antidote to hate is love. This law, and the love it defends, strike a blow against hate in all its forms."

In my view, love is love. Right is right. Justice is justice.

## PRIMARY JUSTICE

When President Obama ran for office in 2008, he made a choice to build a campaign infrastructure somewhat outside of the traditional Democratic Party apparatus. I believe the party suffered from that decision over time.

When I came into office, I wanted to do things differently. I wanted a close relationship with the party, and to embrace my role as the head of it. For example, my campaign had amassed the largest mailing list of supporters that anyone running for office ever had. I decided to give the Democratic National Committee a copy of that list. I had come up through the party, and I wanted my success to help build the success of other Democrats.

However, I was clear-eyed about the party's deficiencies, the most glaring of which, to me, was the Democratic Party's very undemocratic nomination process.

Periodically, the Rules and Bylaws Committee of the Democratic National Committee considers changes to the presidential nominating calendar. The issue had come to a head with Iowa's disastrous performance in conducting the 2020 caucus, with caucus chairs unable to report their votes because of complications with a mobile app



9780316598484_PromiseMeAmerica_int_1P.indd 215 7/17/26 1:51 PM

that made an already complicated counting system even harder to understand. That meant that the candidates and their teams had to wait days for complete results. But the need for change ran deeper than that.

Iowa and New Hampshire are two of the whitest states in the nation. They don't represent the demographics of the party. Or the nation. But they had become the gatekeepers to the presidency.

Few were willing to say it, but the truth was we had in place a process that relegated the base of the Democratic Party to the back of the bus. I had the power to do something about it.

Shortly after the midterm elections, I wrote a letter to the DNC's Rules and Bylaws Committee, explaining several areas of change I wanted to see. They included:

1. I wanted voters of color to have a voice in choosing our nominee, earlier in the process.
2. I wanted states that reflected the overall diversity of the party to play a role earlier in the process, including states with more union households and greater representation of urban, suburban, and rural America.
3. I wanted to do away with caucuses entirely. I felt that caucuses, which require voters to choose in public and spend significant amounts of time to caucus, disadvantage hourly workers and anyone who does not have the flexibility to go to a set location at a set time. For a party dedicated to removing barriers to political participation, caucuses were the exact opposite of what we should be encouraging. I wanted to reward states that made voting easier in both primary and general elections.
4. I wanted the DNC to revisit the decision regularly. As I said in concluding my letter, "For fifty years, the first month of our presidential nominating process has been a treasured part of our democratic process, but it is time to update the



9780316598484_PromiseMeAmerica_int_1P.indd 216 7/17/26 1:51 PM

> process for the 21st century." I wanted to make sure we kept updating it, so I put forward a proposal to do just that.[41]

The traditional process was Iowa's caucuses, followed by New Hampshire's primary, Nevada's caucuses, and then South Carolina's primary.

I proposed the following order of primaries: South Carolina, next New Hampshire and Nevada, then Georgia, then Michigan. Jim Roosevelt (grandson of FDR) and Donna Brazile led the charge for my proposal in the DNC, and it was approved.

As soon as the decision was public, this change was widely characterized as an action I took to advantage myself.

The truth was that it actually exposed me to risk, should I choose to run for reelection. Not only did I upset two of my dear friends and Senate allies — New Hampshire's Senators Maggie Hassan and Jeanne Shaheen — but I broke a cardinal rule. There are few more rock-solid articles of faith in the Democratic Party than this: Don't mess with the New Hampshire presidential primary. New Hampshire's first-in-the-nation status gives the people of New Hampshire enormous power over who becomes president and has long been a point of pride for the entire state.

To be fair, the people of New Hampshire embraced the responsibility that came with that "right" — it's a highly civic-minded state, and people take seriously the job of effectively "vetting" the presidential candidates. Additionally, New Hampshire had become a general election swing state, so they would remain important. I felt there was still a role for them, just not the role they had previously played.

However, if they defied the national Democratic Party's decision (as they ultimately would), it meant that in order to lead the party and honor the change, I'd have to keep myself off the ballot. This I ultimately did, and it yielded a surprising result.



9780316598484_PromiseMeAmerica_int_1P.indd 217 7/17/26 1:51 PM

CHAPTER TEN

# INDIVISIBLE

As I walked to the podium in Tulsa on June 1, 2021, I could see a remarkable trio in front of me: Viola "Mother" Fletcher, 107 years old, Lessie Benningfield "Mother" Randle, 106 years old, and Hughes "Uncle Red" Van Ellis, 100 years old. They were the last three survivors of one of the most horrific moments in American history, which had taken place one hundred years earlier. The Tulsa Race Massacre of 1921. It is a moment that most Americans have never heard about. For most of the past hundred years, it wasn't even taught in our schools. Much of the country acted like it never happened.

But it did. Over two days, on May 31 and June 1, 1921, Black people were shot in the street, smoke and fire filled the air, businesses were burned to the ground. A mob of white supremacists were determined to deliver vigilante justice for what they felt was a crime committed by a Black man against a white woman. They unleashed two days of rage and horror in the Greenwood section of Tulsa, a place that because of the concentration and success of Black businesses there had been named "Black Wall Street." As many as three hundred people were



9780316598484_PromiseMeAmerica_int_1P.indd 219 7/17/26 1:51 PM

killed, some seven hundred injured. Hundreds of homes and business were burned down. Ten thousand people were left homeless.

It was another mark of shame in America's long history with race. It was also a mark of shame on the presidency. Because in the hundred years since the massacre took place, no president had ever gone to Tulsa to acknowledge what took place there. I was determined to rectify that. That's why I was in Tulsa. I have long said that great nations do not bury their past. They face it.

By going there and addressing it head on, I hoped that I could bring some healing to the survivors and their families. Their pain was still vivid. As Mother Fletcher later said, "I have lived through the massacre every day. Our country may forget this history, but I cannot."[1]

I knew that I would never win Oklahoma in any election. But to me, sometimes the ceremonial is substantive. A presidential acknowledgment matters. I said that day:

> We can't just choose to learn what we want to know and not what we should know. We should know the good, the bad, everything. That's what great nations do: They come to terms with their dark sides. And we're a great nation.[2]

Marcia Fudge, my secretary of housing and urban development, traveled with me on Air Force One, along with Cedric Richmond and Susan Rice. Marcia had been a member of Congress from Ohio and a former chair of the Congressional Black Caucus; when I asked her to join my cabinet, I told her simply: "Your job is to take care of people who need our help." I spent most of the plane ride going over my speech, asking for feedback and ideas, and working with my chief speechwriter, Vinay Reddy, to quickly translate them into prose.

I was happy to be warmly greeted at the airport by a cluster of Oklahoma Republicans, including Governor Kevin Stitt, and I appreciated the bipartisan gesture. From there, I went to Greenwood, where I saw an exhibit on the massacre at the Greenwood Cultural



9780316598484_PromiseMeAmerica_int_1P.indd 220 7/17/26 1:51 PM

Center and met with the three survivors. As Mother Fletcher, Mother Randle, and Uncle Red Van Ellis shared their painful memories with me, you could hear a pin drop.

The three survivors had asked if their children and grandchildren could join the meeting. Naturally, we said yes. Many of their family members had never heard in such detail all that these survivors had endured. For so long, they had protected their own children from the pain.

But with the president of the United States coming to shine a light on this dark moment in our history, they didn't hold back. I'm grateful that they didn't. There were tears, hugs, and some laughs. Jill and I always talk about how resilient the human spirit can be. Leaving that room, I felt even more certain about my message that day:

> For much too long, the history of what took place here was told in silence, cloaked in darkness. But just because history is silent, it doesn't mean that it did not take place. And while darkness can hide much, it erases nothing.

I continued, doubling down:

> Some injustices are so heinous, so horrific, so grievous they can't be buried, no matter how hard people try. And so it is here. Only with truth can come healing and justice and repair.

We have learned that lesson time and time again. Only by remembering *all* of our history can we move forward together, as one people. "One nation, indivisible," as the Pledge of Allegiance says.

Sixteen days after my visit to Tulsa, I was proud to formally recognize another overlooked moment. On June 17, 2021, I signed legislation marking Juneteenth, a new federal holiday in honor of the day when the enslaved people of Galveston, Texas, finally learned of their



9780316598484_PromiseMeAmerica_int_1P.indd 221 7/17/26 1:51 PM

freedom, two and a half years after Lincoln signed the Emancipation Proclamation. This was because slaveholders in Texas, the most geographically distant of the Confederate states, made no attempt to free the people they held in bondage. Their freedom would come only with military intervention, which arrived on June 19, 1865. After the signing, I handed my pen to Ms. Opal Lee, known to many as the "grandmother of Juneteenth." In 2016, at age eighty-nine, she took a symbolic walk from Fort Worth, Texas, to Washington, DC, two and a half miles a day, gathering 1.6 million petition signatures along the way. In 2024, I awarded her the Presidential Medal of Freedom.

Juneteenth was to me an important moment to bring out of the darkness. I was delighted when the bill to create a new federal holiday received overwhelming bipartisan support. It was the first new federal holiday since Martin Luther King Jr. Day was proclaimed in 1983.

Nearly a year later I was in the Rose Garden, fixing yet another historical lapse. How could it be that in 2022, lynching was not a federal hate crime? Unlike the Tulsa Race Massacre, America's long, shameful history with lynching is no secret. We've seen it documented in harrowing photos, in books and movies. We know it's a part of our history. Indeed, one of the most powerful memorials in the nation is the National Memorial for Peace and Justice in Montgomery, Alabama — also known as the Lynching Memorial. It was built in 2018 in an effort led by Bryan Stevenson, a lawyer and social justice champion who happens to hail from Delaware. Make a point of seeing it. It will change you forever. Yet still, by the time I entered the presidency, there was no federal law on the books against lynching.

On March 29, 2022, I changed that, with some help from Congress. A bill to make lynching a federal crime had finally been voted on and approved, ending more than a century of failed efforts. When I signed it, it became the law of the land. It was mind-boggling that it had taken so long. In 1898, the crusading Black journalist Ida B. Wells visited the White House to urge President William McKinley



9780316598484_PromiseMeAmerica_int_1P.indd 222 7/17/26 1:51 PM

to make lynching illegal. But McKinley didn't act, and incredibly, over the next century, the legislation proved difficult to pass in an institution that was often controlled by powerful Southerners. In the White House with me the day I signed the bill into law was Michelle Duster, the great-granddaughter of Ida B. Wells.

The bill was named after Emmett Till, the fourteen-year-old boy from Chicago who was brutally murdered while visiting relatives in Mississippi. His crime? Whistling at a white woman named Carolyn Bryant, although even that is in dispute. Bryant's husband and his half brother kidnapped Emmett, beat him, shot him in the head, and threw his body in the Tallahatchie River. Despite their clear guilt, they were acquitted. (They later publicly took credit for the killing, knowing they couldn't be tried twice for the same crime.)

Emmett Till's horrific death became a national news story in September 1955, in part because of the bravery of Emmett's mother, who insisted on an open-casket funeral so that the world could witness the brutality of his injuries. The slaying awakened millions to the double standard of a legal system that treated some Americans very differently from others. The old ways simply could not endure.

Emmett's legacy was profound. When Rosa Parks refused to give up her seat on a bus in Montgomery, it was four days after she had attended a meeting organized by one of the leaders speaking out about the murder. She later told Emmett's mother, Mamie Till-Mobley, that she was acting on his behalf when she almost single-handedly launched the bus boycott and all that came after. I was proud to sign that bill—and I was proud a year later to be in the presence of the Till family as I issued the proclamation that created the Emmett Till and Mamie Till-Mobley National Monument, located at two sites in Mississippi and one in Chicago, Illinois. As I said, some crimes are so heinous that they can't be buried. They have to be faced. I was determined to do that.

And as I said while signing the Emmett Till Antilynching Act, racial hate isn't an old problem; it's a persistent problem. Hate never



9780316598484_PromiseMeAmerica_int_1P.indd 223 7/17/26 1:51 PM

goes away; it only hides. It hides under the rocks. And given just a little bit of oxygen, it comes roaring back out. All of us have to stop it.

## FINDING A VOICE

The Delaware I grew up in was a Southern state in many ways, and defined as such by the US Census Bureau. But it was also Northern, close to Philadelphia and the Northeast Corridor. It had been a slave state, but aligned with the North during the Civil War. A century later, the contradictions remained. Delaware's constitution piously asserted that "no distinction shall be made on account of race or color," yet also required that "separate schools for white and colored children shall be maintained."[3] That was a head-scratcher.

So my home state, while small, was an important laboratory for working out the better race relations that America needed after the Second World War. When *Brown v. Board of Education* was decided by the Supreme Court in 1954, ordering that schools be integrated, it followed a long train of lower-court cases, two of which had originated in Delaware (one in my old hometown of Claymont).[4]

For nine long months after the assassination of Martin Luther King Jr., and the rioting that followed, the Delaware National Guard occupied the streets of Wilmington, the longest military occupation of an American city since the Civil War.

All of these memories were very fresh to me, even decades later, as I ran for the presidency in 2020.

I, of course, recognized that I had always been lifted by the support of African American friends, from my earliest campaigns onward. But it was more than that; I felt like I had become a better public servant and a better person by opening myself up to other perspectives. We should all try to walk in someone else's shoes now and then.

That race relations were on the ballot in 2020 was pretty clear to all observers. It was also the summer of Black Lives Matter, and of an unusually high level of anger. The murder of George Floyd evoked



9780316598484_PromiseMeAmerica_int_1P.indd 224 7/17/26 1:51 PM

memories of other police killings earlier in the decade, including Eric Garner in New York and Breonna Taylor in Louisville, Kentucky. I was not in favor of calls to "defund the police." But I understood the pain that Black Americans were feeling, and I felt that it was my job, as president to answer, as I said in my inaugural address, a cry for racial justice some four hundred years in the making.

As a result, I worked to ensure that every one of my legislative accomplishments had justice baked in: The American Rescue Plan made sure that communities of color received equal access to vaccines and that small businesses received equal access to aid; the Bipartisan Infrastructure Act removed lead pipes that were poisoning our children's drinking water and invested in public transportation and worked to reconnect communities — often communities of color — that had been physically cut off from economic opportunity by highways. My Environmental Protection Agency, under the leadership of Michael Regan, the first Black man to lead the agency, created an office charged with advancing environmental justice and civil rights.

---

There was another injustice I had the opportunity to remedy. In all of America's history, no Black woman had ever been named to the Supreme Court. On the campaign trail in February 2020, in South Carolina, I had made a promise to do better. This promise made was now a promise kept. On April 7, 2022, the Senate confirmed my nominee for the highest court in the land, Ketanji Brown Jackson.

As with everything in Washington, it took some doing to get there. In January, Supreme Court Justice Stephen Breyer had informed me that he would be stepping down on June 30. This was not entirely unexpected; Justice Breyer had been commenting on the possibility of his retirement in interviews, and he clearly wanted to avoid the controversies that had plagued recent Supreme Court appointments. I



9780316598484_PromiseMeAmerica_int_1P.indd 225 7/17/26 1:51 PM

admired his patriotic decision, made at a time when he was still able to discharge his responsibilities and write brilliant opinions.

On January 27, Justice Breyer appeared with me at the White House to confirm that he was stepping down. On February 25, I announced my intention to appoint Ketanji Brown Jackson as his replacement. That she was a brilliant jurist was clear to me from the moment I met her. In many ways, she was the perfect successor to Stephen Breyer. She had clerked for him as a young law student, and like him, she had graduated from Harvard Law School. She had long experience in the law, both in private practice and in public service. What may have attracted me the most was her experience as a public defender—the same job I had held in Wilmington at the start of my career. But I also was moved by her personal background, as the daughter of teachers (who had attended Historically Black Colleges), with a lot of policemen in her family (two of her uncles and her brother).[5]

Her CV also had plenty of other experience to recommend her. Barack had appointed her as a district judge for the US District Court in the District of Columbia in 2013. There she served with great distinction and protected the balance of powers designed by the founders by ruling against the examples of executive overreach that had been all too frequent during the Trump administration. A phrase she used, "presidents are not kings," was widely repeated at the time.

Eight years later, in 2021, I appointed her to the US Court of Appeals for the District of Columbia Circuit, so she was quite nearby when I needed her for the highest court in the land. During the confirmation hearing, some senators stirred things up, with questions about her definition of a woman, a disgusting smear campaign that she was somehow soft on child predators, and constant interruptions of her answers.

The day we witnessed her confirmation was one of the proudest of my presidency. The drama was palpable as we gathered in the Roosevelt Room of the White House to watch the vote on TV. I



9780316598484_PromiseMeAmerica_int_1P.indd 226 7/17/26 1:51 PM

entered from the Oval Office a little before two. Ketanji was already there, along with Minyon Moore, Cedric Richmond, and Ron Klain, my chief of staff. Minyon is a longtime strategist, universally well respected, and a friend. I had asked her and another former colleague, Senator Doug Jones of Alabama, to play key roles on the nomination team, along with Ben LaBolt, a communications strategist who, after Kate Bedingfield's departure, would rejoin my White House staff as communications director.

You could feel history in the air. Over the mantel, there is a painting of Theodore Roosevelt as a Rough Rider. I was reminded of the controversy he stirred in 1901, simply by inviting a leading African American educator, Booker T. Washington, to sit down with him for dinner.

Now, a little over a century later, we could celebrate the great distance that our country had come. It wasn't simply that no Black woman had ever made it onto the court; we were also keenly aware of just how hard it had been in recent years to get any Democratic nominee onto the court. You had to go back to 2009 and 2010, when Barack nominated Sonia Sotomayor and Elena Kagan; his last nominee, Merrick Garland, had been stalled in the Senate on the most partisan of grounds in 2016.

So we were apprehensive. As the votes were counted, Ketanji and I linked arms, waiting. Each time a senator voted yes, our eyes lit up. I was proud to know that Kamala Harris was just down Pennsylvania Avenue in the Senate Chamber, presiding over the vote.

At the critical moment, Ketanji and I stood up by the TV screen, both of us somber and expectant. We still needed that vote to make it official. I was enormously pleased when three Republicans (Mitt Romney, Susan Collins, and Lisa Murkowski) joined Democrats in a 53–47 vote that gave her the job. It felt like history was moving in the right direction again.

At 2:19 p.m., when confirmation came, we embraced and took a selfie. A photo of that moment quickly went viral. Everyone around us was clapping and cheering.



9780316598484_PromiseMeAmerica_int_1P.indd 227 7/17/26 1:51 PM

A day later, on April 8, 2022, I welcomed our newest justice to a reception in her honor at the White House. We were ready to celebrate in a big way. The weather was beautiful, and I know I was beaming as I said, "This is going to let so much sun shine on so many young women." Justice Jackson was smiling too, but she also conveyed the gravitas of the occasion. Already, she seemed different — protected by a brand-new security detail provided by the court and weighing her words carefully. This day had been a long time coming. As she put it in her remarks, "It has taken two hundred and thirty-two years and one hundred and fifteen prior appointments for a Black woman to be selected to serve on the Supreme Court of the United States. But we've made it. We've made it. All of us."[6]

As proud as I was of Ketanji's confirmation, I was proud of all my judicial confirmations, which included appointing a historic sixty-three Black judges to lifetime positions, forty of whom were Black women, a number greater than that appointed by all previous administrations combined.

There were, however, some disappointments. Throughout 2021, we tried tirelessly to pass the John R. Lewis Voting Rights Advancement Act, designed to strengthen the Voting Rights Act of 1965 and respond to a terrible Supreme Court decision in 2013, *Shelby County v. Holder*. That decision removed a provision from the act that required states with a history of voting rights violations to submit to special approval from the federal government if they altered their voting policy. As soon as *Shelby County v. Holder* passed, Southern states began to go back to the old ways, cutting back voter rolls. On August 24, 2021, the House passed the John R. Lewis Voting Rights Advancement Act 219–212, but it died in the Senate.

We tried again in January 2022, calling it the Freedom to Vote Act this time. I put real effort into it, including a memorable trip to Atlanta (Dr. King's hometown) on January 11. There I gave a speech about John Lewis, Dr. King, and the original Voting Rights Act of 1965, one of the towering achievements of the civil rights movement.



9780316598484_PromiseMeAmerica_int_1P.indd 228 7/17/26 1:51 PM

All these years later, Georgia was still ground zero for voting rights; only a year earlier, Donald Trump had tried to intimidate Georgia's Republican secretary of state, Brad Raffensperger, by asking him to "find" 11,780 votes, illegally, in the aftermath of the 2020 election. It was great to be back in Georgia, with so many friends, including a gaggle of senators and members of Congress who came with me. But back in Washington, progress again fell prey to a partisan vote. The Republicans were against it, and when Democrats tried to change the filibuster rules in an attempt to pass it, two of our senators, Joe Manchin and Kyrsten Sinema, refused to change the filibuster rules that would have allowed us to get it through.[7]

Despite that setback, I was resolved to keep moving forward, and to help the country heal from the anger and distrust that had flared up over George Floyd's murder in 2020. We couldn't get the George Floyd Justice in Policing Act through the Senate, because of Republican opposition, but I was able to sign executive orders to advance accountable policing. I was also proud to welcome George Floyd's family to the White House on May 25, 2021, the anniversary of his death.[8]

As the economy recovered from COVID and the supply chain shocks of 2020, my efforts to embed fairness and justice into my legislation and executive action bore fruit. Soon we had the lowest Black unemployment in history, with 2.4 million new jobs for Black Americans. We increased affordable health care coverage by 95 percent and tripled Black and Latino enrollment. We cut costs for high-speed internet to 5.5 million Black households and invested more than $19 billion in Historically Black Colleges and Universities, or HBCUs.[9]

My commitment to HBCUs was no political calculation. It was deeply personal and rooted in the fact that during my first campaign for Senate, some of the first people to organize for me were the students, faculty, and alumni of Delaware State University. I won that race in 1972 by a grand total of 3,162 votes, and DSU helped deliver them.



9780316598484_PromiseMeAmerica_int_1P.indd 229 7/17/26 1:51 PM

I never tired of telling that story, and I found an appreciative audience when I went to Philadelphia in September 2024 to speak before all the HBCU presidents, gathered for HBCU Week. After years of an ongoing relationship with Delaware State, I knew that HBCUs were not simply educational institutions; they form a network of communities that build and sustain the Black middle class. And they do it with far less than what is fair or sufficient (and certainly without the giant endowments that so many older universities can draw on).

I was proud to have helped make Kamala Harris, a Howard University graduate and member of Alpha Kappa Alpha, the highest-ranking HBCU graduate in history when she became vice president. I asked Tony Allen, the president of Delaware State and a former speechwriter from my Senate office, to serve as CEO of my inaugural ceremonies in 2021, and then to chair the President's Board of Advisors on HBCUs. I also convened a "Divine Nine" (the nine historically African American fraternities and sororities) working group, to ensure that we were reaching communities of color.

Policy followed, including a $19 billion commitment, the most aggressive contribution to Black higher education in the 187 years of the sector's existence. That included nearly $4 billion in pandemic relief, $2.6 billion through the Department of Education, $1.6 billion in capital finance debt relief for forty-five public and private HBCUs, and broader student debt cancellation, reaching roughly 1.5 million HBCU students.

In 2024, my Council of Economic Advisers (chaired from 2021 to 2023 by Dr. Cecilia Rouse — Ceci as she is known — a brilliant economist and the first Black person to hold that role) issued a report quantifying what HBCU presidents had argued for decades: that HBCUs produce the lion's share of Black professionals. This includes 40 percent of all Black engineers, 50 percent of all Black teachers, 70 percent of all Black doctors and dentists, and 80 percent of all Black judges. To invest in them is, fundamentally, to invest in the American economy.



9780316598484_PromiseMeAmerica_int_1P.indd 230 7/17/26 1:51 PM

I returned to the Delaware State University campus as president in 2022 to speak about my efforts to help relieve America's student debt burden. I framed my own work in the words of Mary McLeod Bethune, a great Black leader and educator of the 1930s and 1940s, a close friend of Eleanor Roosevelt. As Bethune said, "The freedom gates are half ajar. We must pry them fully open."[10] That was our project now — and it began on a small HBCU campus in Delaware that took a chance on a young senator before anyone else did.

By the way, the passage of time has clarified just how effective these economic policies were. They not only reached Black Americans who had been left out of so many economic recoveries before; they lifted all working people. A 2025 analysis by Paul Krugman, the Nobel Prize–winning economist, found that under my leadership, the wage growth for the bottom 25 percent earners outpaced that for the top 25 percent — something that almost never happens. He observed that even for working people, higher wages and job creation outran increases in the cost of living. And he noted that we drove inflation down without causing job losses or a recession.[11]

I did what I believed was right. To address historical injustices. To expand opportunity to every American. To make the government more reflective of the nation. To stand up for what I believe is this nation's sacred creed — that we are all created equal and deserve to be treated equally throughout our lives. Rather than pushing too hard, I will always feel I didn't do enough.

Near the end of his life, LBJ went to speak at the site of his future library, to a conference on civil rights. It was his last public appearance. His doctor had ordered him not to go. He went anyway. There he surprised observers, and perhaps himself, by delivering an impassioned speech about civil rights. As he said, "The progress has been much too small. We haven't done nearly enough. I'm kind of ashamed of myself that I had six years and couldn't do more than I did … So let no one delude themselves that our work is done … To be Black in a white society is not to stand on level and equal ground."[12]



9780316598484_PromiseMeAmerica_int_1P.indd 231 7/17/26 1:51 PM

Of course he had done a great deal, more than any president except Lincoln. But he was willing to look hard at himself and ask if he had done enough to make this country fair for *all* of its citizens.

I hope our future generations will summon the same spirit of self-examination — no matter what their race or religion — and do all they can to help us come together a little more in the years ahead. As Bayard Rustin wrote, "We are all one — and if we don't know it, we will learn it the hard way."[13]

HBG



9780316598484_PromiseMeAmerica_int_1P.indd 232 7/17/26 1:51 PM

CHAPTER ELEVEN

# RAIL FORCE ONE

As Amtrak Joe, I had logged more miles on trains than anyone else in Washington. One of the Capitol Hill newspapers estimated that, as a senator, I had taken more than seven thousand round trips on Amtrak. Day after day, I rode the 110 miles from Wilmington to Washington. Night after night, I headed back home. I could recite the names of the stations in my sleep. Amtrak conductors were almost like members of the family. I was in the Wilmington station so often it was like a second home, and it was a touching gesture when Amtrak named it for me.

When I became president, the Secret Service didn't want me riding the train anymore. They felt it could be risky, with so many variables they couldn't control. So there was a note of irony when, in February 2023, plans came together for an all-night journey by train across Poland and Ukraine to reach Kyiv on a top-secret visit. It was only a couple of days of a four-year presidency; yet the story of how it came to pass says a lot about how the presidency works, with gambles and risks baked into complex decision-making.



9780316598484_PromiseMeAmerica_int_1P.indd 233 7/17/26 1:51 PM

That was not the first foreign policy adventure of 2023, though. In late January, our warning systems had picked up a slow-moving aerial object.

A large balloon, flying at a high altitude, had been launched from China, and drifted over the Pacific Ocean before veering erratically toward Alaska, Western Canada, and the continental United States. The Chinese claimed it was a weather balloon that had drifted off course, but its extensive surveillance apparatus suggested that it was a spy ship. I ordered the air force to shoot it down, as soon as the balloon had drifted over the Atlantic Ocean, off South Carolina. After examining the wreckage, we were relieved to find that it had not been able to transmit any information back to China.

Still, the incident was a reminder of just how volatile the world's most important bilateral relationship remained. The Chinese were smarting from a series of export controls we had levied to prevent them from acquiring our most sophisticated technologies. But it was crucial that we not let the incident spin out of control. We were China's biggest trading partner, and we needed Chinese cooperation in countless other ways, from climate change to Ukraine.

---

On February 7, 2023, in my second State of the Union address to Congress, I took some time to address the situation in Ukraine. We were coming up on the one-year anniversary of Putin's invasion, and I wanted to assess the situation candidly before the American people. There was much to celebrate—Vladimir Putin had obviously failed in his bid to seize Kyiv within days and decapitate its government. Only six weeks earlier, on December 21, Volodymyr Zelensky had stood at the same podium in the House of Representatives, before a joint session, to thank America for our support and project his defiance of Putin. As he put it, "Ukraine is alive and kicking."[1]



9780316598484_PromiseMeAmerica_int_1P.indd 234 7/17/26 1:51 PM

There were other signs of Putin's failure, a year later. Russians were leaving their country in droves — perhaps as many as a million had fled, fearing the draft, or martial law, and the stifling of dissent. Unsurprisingly, this flood included some of Russia's most talented and creative thinkers, including 10 percent of its IT community. The migrants had fled in all directions, united by a single-minded drive to escape Putin's regime. Two men even took a small boat from Siberia to Alaska.[2]

President Zelensky closed his speech to Congress by wishing us a "happy, victorious New Year." But there were signs that his own victory was still a long way away. The Russians rang in the New Year with a punishing assault on Kyiv, raining missiles and exploding drones on families trying to celebrate. That same evening, Putin gave an absurd speech, arguing that the war against Ukraine was a struggle for Russia's very existence.[3]

And the war was grinding on, with both armies entrenched and little hope of a change in the status quo. In his desperation, Putin had been turning to increasingly dubious strategies. His crony Yevgeny Prigozhin was recruiting tens of thousands of convicts into his mercenary army, the Wagner Group. There were also signs that the North Koreans were becoming more involved, supporting Russia by sending ammunition, howitzers, and missile systems into Ukraine (they would eventually send soldiers as well).

To counter these threats, we were continually stepping up our assistance to Ukraine, while taking care to avoid a wider conflict. In December and January, we announced that we were sending a Patriot air-defense battery, 31 M1A2 Abrams tanks, 90 Stryker armored personnel carriers, and 109 Bradley Fighting Vehicles. Our allies in Europe also stepped up their contributions significantly, particularly with tanks. Our response was nevertheless a measured one: We withheld sending aircraft or offensive weapons like long-range missiles that would take the war more directly into Russia. We wanted our



9780316598484_PromiseMeAmerica_int_1P.indd 235 7/17/26 1:51 PM

weapons to be used by Ukraine to repel an invader, not to launch an invasion of their own.[4]

---

The arrival of a new speaker (despite the fact that it took Republicans fifteen rounds of voting to choose Kevin McCarthy) and a Republican majority, including many Republicans who were dubious about foreign spending, made me eager to lock in as much support for Ukraine as we could, early in the new term. During President Zelensky's speech to Congress in December, some MAGA-affiliated Republicans conspicuously refused to applaud, or didn't even attend. There were exceptions; I always appreciated that the Senate minority leader, Mitch McConnell, was with us on Ukraine. But Kevin McCarthy was more cautious, and not entirely able to shut out the noise coming from Donald Trump and his disaffected "America First" followers.[5] That noise was also being registered in new polls that suggested Americans did not want a protracted war in Ukraine. The first year of the war had gone well, but no one wanted a war of attrition that would lead to millions of casualties and disrupt the global economy.[6]

We were eager to see Ukraine make new progress on the battlefield, and soon. We conveyed this message with a number of visits by top advisers.[7] I also wanted to do my part, to send a message of solidarity. With the one-year anniversary approaching, there was a chance to reclaim the narrative and remind the world why it was so important to stand up to bullies. All these thoughts were converging as my team of advisers and I began to see a path forward. By boarding a train, I could show America's support for Ukraine in a most personal way.

## THE PLANNING BEGINS

The idea of a secret trip to Kyiv had been germinating in top-level meetings for a few months. Other European leaders had made the



9780316598484_PromiseMeAmerica_int_1P.indd 236 7/17/26 1:51 PM

trip. Early in the war, the prime ministers of nearby countries (Poland, Slovenia, and the Czech Republic) had made a public show of their commitment to Ukraine by greeting Volodymyr Zelensky in person. The impulse gradually spread around Europe and the Atlantic alliance, as other leaders, including Rishi Sunak, Emmanuel Macron, Giorgia Meloni, and Justin Trudeau, all made the trek.[8]

But the stakes were higher for me, for quite a few reasons. It is an enormously complex operation to move the president of the United States around the world.

A standard international trip for a president involves roughly one thousand people and months of advance planning. Generally, there is a pre-advance trip months beforehand for representatives of the Secret Service to understand driving routes and locations, State Department representatives to handle the diplomacy of the stops, and military aides to handle other security concerns. And then, about ten days before a trip, the entire infrastructure of the presidency gets put in place; this involves dozens of C-17 flights, transporting everything from the limousines to the Marine One helicopter to the communications equipment.

This all requires coordination among hundreds of people, including the Secret Service, military officials, aviation experts, motorcade planners, US embassies, and people spread throughout the chain of command of the executive branch of the US government. Every single step that a president takes is carefully tracked, particularly for sensitive reasons relating to military operations and the nuclear command.

What that means is that on a standard international trip, everyone at the State Department knows, everyone at the Department of Defense knows, and everyone at the White House knows. And, because a few representatives of the media join on the pre-advance trip in order to scout locations for their coverage, the press knows as well. This trip would have to be planned in near-total secrecy, with only a few trusted representatives being made aware.

Every aspect of the operation was complicated, beginning with the fact that we had to throw out most of our ordinary planning



9780316598484_PromiseMeAmerica_int_1P.indd 237 7/17/26 1:51 PM

procedures. This would be a double challenge: First, we had to plan a way to get me in and out of Kyiv, with a tiny traveling party, while we also needed to keep the plan from our own team, so that it would not leak out to a global constellation of reporters, watchdogs, and foreign observers, whose main job was to know whatever I was doing.

Jen O'Malley Dillon, my deputy chief of staff, spearheaded the visit's complex planning, which also involved Ryan Montoya, my trip director; Jake Sullivan, my national security adviser; General Garrett Hoffman, who led the White House Military Office; Darryl Volpicelli, who would be the Secret Service special agent in charge of the trip; and Annie Tomasini, my head of Oval Office operations. They met in a secret operations center on the grounds of the White House known only to a select few.

Ryan Montoya was a key member of my team. During the Obama administration, he had served as the advance lead for many major trips for the president and first lady, and for me. In that time, he had developed strong relationships with the Secret Service and White House Military Office, which allowed him to press for more creative thinking around my travels. Ryan had a deeply serious demeanor, so I enjoyed joking with him. When we went over my schedule and the intricate timing of my various movements, both of us knowing my propensity to run late and long at meetings and events, I would ask him why he was lying to me again. Given that he often had to come into meetings between me and heads of state to say that it was time to go, or to tell me where we were supposed to be standing, I would observe that I thought I was the most powerful person in the world, and yet I had to answer to Ryan.

There were serious safety concerns about the trip, as the Secret Service made clear in a number of meetings. To say that they were unhappy would be an extreme understatement. On a long train trip, in a distant nation at war, I was simply too exposed. It was not just that our delegation would be small and vulnerable. We also would not have the usual military protections in place. For long stretches of the



9780316598484_PromiseMeAmerica_int_1P.indd 238 7/17/26 1:51 PM

trip, I would be in an ordinary railroad car, far from the aircraft and other forms of backup that ordinarily would be nearby in case of an emergency.

As we began to think seriously about the plan, we realized that very few presidents had ever traveled to an active war zone. There were a few exceptions. James Madison was president in 1814 when the war zone came to him; as the British invaded Washington, they set fire to the Capitol and the White House (where scorch marks can still be seen on a few walls).[9] We owe a debt of gratitude to Dolley Madison, who made sure that Gilbert Stuart's painting of George Washington was saved from the conflagration.[10]

Fifty years later, in the summer of 1864, another president saw an invader come close when Confederate troops entered the District of Columbia but were repulsed at Fort Stevens, near the Maryland border. Abraham Lincoln wanted to see the fighting for himself and took a short carriage ride to the fort, where he was cheered by the troops. Soon, however, the situation became dangerous. Despite good intentions, standing very tall in his stovepipe hat, Lincoln was an obvious target for sharpshooters (in fact, a surgeon standing next to Lincoln was wounded). According to legend, the situation was remedied when a nearby officer yelled, "Get down, you damn fool!" Many believe that the officer was a future justice of the Supreme Court, Oliver Wendell Holmes Jr. If so, he was merely giving voice to the private opinions that the court's justices have often held about the executive branch.[11]

At times, the Secret Service must have felt a similar frustration with me, as the details of the trip became clearer and they realized how close I would be to an active military zone, with missiles and drones raining down on Kyiv nightly. There were other dangers as well; many Ukrainians had learned to operate man-portable air-defense systems, or MANPADs. These are shoulder-fired surface-to-air missiles that can be launched at aircraft by small teams or even a single person. If missiles were flying in the air, for any reason, it would greatly increase the danger, and the desire for Russian retaliation.



9780316598484_PromiseMeAmerica_int_1P.indd 239 7/17/26 1:51 PM

Of course, as vice president I had often traveled to see our military personnel in war zones — in Iraq and Afghanistan, specifically. But those visits were executed by our own aircraft to get me safely to a forward operating base, protected by our troops. This time, we would be far more exposed, with no US bases anywhere close, and no control over the skies. We had a small complement of soldiers in Ukraine, attached to our embassy, but that was it. In fact, the absence of American troops was an important part of our diplomacy, because we expressly wanted to point out to the Russians that we were not involved in any ground fighting, even as we provided arms to the Ukrainians.[12]

Our planning meetings in the White House were necessarily "close hold" — or kept to a small number of people. To overcome the strong objections of the Secret Service, we needed to hear from our top military officials, and they came through magnificently. Both Lloyd Austin, the secretary of defense, and Mark Milley, the chair of the Joint Chiefs, assured us that we could pull off the trip. Still, we faced countless operational decisions. How big should the delegation be? A larger group might increase our safety but would also increase the risk of detection. What kind of aircraft should we fly in? Again, a larger aircraft would be safer, and no plane is better equipped than Air Force One. But that would be a rather obvious signal to the world that I was in the neighborhood. Should we tell the Russians about the trip? That might mitigate the danger; but then again, it might not. In the end, we did let them know, through official channels, just a few hours before the trip began. Our message was blunt and promised severe retaliation if they interfered in any way.[13]

All of these complex questions came to a head on Friday, February 17, three days before the planned trip. In a final meeting, in the Oval Office, the question was put to me: Go, or no go? I gave the green light. I was asking Ukraine to make a big effort in the months ahead. I wanted to show them that I was with them, every step of the way.[14]

That weekend we did our best to appear normal, while a great deal of frantic planning was happening behind the scenes. As always, my



9780316598484_PromiseMeAmerica_int_1P.indd 240 7/17/26 1:51 PM

team was superb, maintaining discipline and confidentiality while dealing with an immense number of contingencies.

Another vexing question was on our minds, in the final hours: To what extent should we let the media know? Usually, a large press contingent traveled with me; obviously we couldn't do that this time. But we wanted to show that we respected the media, and our obligation to report honestly, through them, to the American people. In the end we approached the White House Correspondents' Association and said that we would make it possible for a very small press delegation to join me. Normally, the presidential press pool involved thirteen "bodies" — reporters and photographers who traveled with me. Kate Bedingfield, our communications director, delicately stipulated that this was a trip that could accommodate only one print reporter and one photographer. Guided by the White House Correspondents' Association set rotation, they designated Sabrina Siddiqui from *The Wall Street Journal* and photographer Evan Vucci from the Associated Press, sworn to secrecy until the story could be safely released.[15] When Kate sat down with Sabrina and Tamara Keith, who was the president of the White House Correspondents' Association, Tamara asked if Sabrina was sure she was up to it. She was, but had one nonnegotiable: She needed constant access to electrical outlets, for a breast pump, and a refrigerator. She had recently given birth and needed to pump milk for her infant daughter back home.

No aspect of the planning was too small to think about, for an operation of this complexity, and certainly not this one. Even rechargeable wireless pumps could give off electrical signals that posed a security risk, so Kate — a working mother herself — asked for the exact make and model of the pump, and that was factored into our planning. Later, when Sabrina wrote an account of the trip, after it was safe to do so, she revealed that she had smuggled her child's rubber ducky into her baggage, as a good-luck token.[16]

Sabrina and Evan didn't have much time to get ready, or much information about where we were going. But they were pros. They



9780316598484_PromiseMeAmerica_int_1P.indd 241 7/17/26 1:51 PM

were told to look out for an email with the subject line: "Arrival instructions for the golf tourney." It was sent on Saturday at 3 p.m., with instructions to report to Joint Base Andrews between 2 and 2:15 a.m. on Sunday, February 19. They were told that their phones would be confiscated for the first part of the trip, until it could be reported that I had arrived safely.[17]

On Saturday, before that very early morning departure, I busied myself in preparation, packing lightly. I also made a few modest public appearances, including visiting the National Museum of American History, attending a 5 p.m. Mass at Holy Trinity in Georgetown, and then eating dinner with Jill at the Red Hen, a popular restaurant. It was a measure of how well we had kept our secret that the biggest news from the day, as reported by the local media, was that we had both ordered rigatoni.[18] Scandalous.

We went back to the White House, and I tried to get a few winks in, before a very early wake-up call. At 3 a.m., I got into an unmarked SUV, wearing jeans, sneakers, and a black hoodie. In my bag, we had packed clothing that could accommodate a bulletproof vest, although I ultimately chose not to wear the vest. We pulled out of the White House and began to drive through the darkness to the southeast, toward the Suitland Parkway and Andrews. There was not a car in sight. Usually, there are scores of White House staffers on a trip, to help perform all the complex functions of the executive branch, anywhere. This time, there were only three senior aides with me: Jake Sullivan, Annie Tomasini, and Jen O'Malley Dillon.[19]

Normally, of course, we would pull up alongside Air Force One. This time, the SUV brought me into a hangar, and I walked onto the tarmac to board a much smaller plane, a Boeing 757 (which, when in military service, is called a C-32), parked in the darkness, with all its shades drawn. I walked up the steps and was happy to see the other members of our team already inside the plane, seated around tables. That included a small number of Secret Service and medical



9780316598484_PromiseMeAmerica_int_1P.indd 242 7/17/26 1:51 PM

personnel. I gave them and the pilots a thumbs-up, and the plane taxied toward the runway.[20]

## THE FLIGHT

The journey began at 4:15, as we took off to the east. For the first few minutes of the flight, I huddled with Jake, to go over details of the visit. Then I went out to a conference table to speak with my team and thank them for their efforts. Finally, I went into my cabin to get a little more sleep before the big day began. The flight was mostly uneventful, but there was a moment of tension when we learned that a plane spotter had announced on social media that an unknown plane with an unknown dignitary was flying across the Atlantic.

Our next stop was Ramstein Air Base in southwestern Germany, where we landed at 5:15 p.m. local time. This huge installation serves as our air force headquarters in Europe and houses more than fifty thousand American personnel. I was eager to go out and greet them, but again, secrecy demanded that we keep the window shades down as we refueled. Meanwhile, back at the White House, the staff kept up the ruse that I was still in the residence, pretending to run papers over to me, ordering me lunch, and going through other motions that led most people to believe I was still on the grounds.

After an hour and a quarter, we were ready for the second leg of the trip and flew a shorter distance, to Rzeszów-Jasionka Airport in southeastern Poland, where we landed at 8 p.m. It was getting dark and it was foggy out, which added to the cloak-and-dagger nature of the entire scene. Since the war in Ukraine started, the area had quickly become a major hub for the shipment of goods and people, including, suddenly, a president of the United States, very far from the White House.[21]

Here, unlike in Germany, I had to get off the plane, so we employed another ruse. Jake Sullivan came out the front door, where a VIP usually appears, and came down the steps, into a waiting limo.



9780316598484_PromiseMeAmerica_int_1P.indd 243 7/17/26 1:51 PM

I exited through the back door with all our staff, my face covered with a mask. A baseball hat and a scarf provided a little more cover. Like the staff, I was carrying my own bags. No one recognized me as I quietly walked up to the car that Jake had gotten into, opened the door, and sat in the seat facing Jake (normally it was the other way around). He was holding a hot cup of coffee for me, which he had carried off the plane.

Our small motorcade found its way to the airport exit and began heading southeast, toward the Polish town of Przemyśl, next to the Ukrainian border. We deliberately didn't use sirens, to avoid calling attention to ourselves.

After about an hour, we reached our destination, a train station that, like the airport, had suddenly become very busy as a conduit into Ukraine. The Przemyśl Główny, as it was known, was a beautiful old station that dated back to 1860, the year Abraham Lincoln was elected. It had been built by the Habsburgs, when the Austro-Hungarian Empire was near the height of its powers (and ruled over this particular piece of what is now Poland). The railroad company that built the station was formally called the Imperial and Royal Privileged Galician Railway of Archduke Charles Louis. With a name like that, I wasn't sure they would allow Amtrak Joe to even set foot in the place, and in fact, they didn't. Instead, I admired it from the outside as the small motorcade drove me past the station and right up to the train itself, which was eight cars long. At 9:15 p.m., I quickly got out and boarded the train. Fifteen minutes later, the train shuddered to life, and we were on our way to Kyiv.

## NIGHT TRAIN

We crossed into Ukraine nine miles later, and our small team felt good about making it this far, undetected. Now we could settle in for the night and try to get some shut-eye before another big day. We had a long way to go still, traveling east across Ukraine, which, although



9780316598484_PromiseMeAmerica_int_1P.indd 244 7/17/26 1:51 PM

much smaller than Russia, is still the largest country entirely in Europe. Our slowly rolling train would take more than ten hours to cover the roughly four hundred miles needed to reach Ukraine's capital in the morning.

Already, it felt historic, just to be there. I knew that this particular train route had been essential to the war effort. Huge quantities of weapons and supplies had been brought in along this corridor. So in a sense, we were already close to the front lines. The train was comfortable, although fairly spartan. There were very few frills, just small cabins each with a bed, and another meeting room with a long table, where Jake Sullivan and I sat briefly to compare thoughts on the eve of a long day of meetings and conversations with the Ukrainians.[22]

We were all feeling both the energy that comes from adrenaline and the somberness that comes from seriousness of purpose. Our airplane crew had thoughtfully packed up some bags of snacks for our long night of travel. They included PB&Js (I take the composition of my PB&Js very seriously, going a little heavier on the J than most), turkey sandwiches, potato chips, chocolate chip cookies, and macadamia nut Clif Bars. As we snacked, Annie, Jen, Jake, Kevin "Doc" O'Connor (the White House physician who had been with me since the vice presidency), and I chatted before the fatigue of a long day and the jet lag caught up to us.

We had been given a map of our train route, and it was fascinating for an old train buff to scrutinize it. Outside the windows, all was darkness, except for the occasional streetlight, or perhaps a waving lamp, held by a sentry. Although I did not feel especially endangered, the Secret Service and military were most concerned about this middle portion of the trip, when we would be more vulnerable than at other times because of a lack of nearby military presence. They even went to the length of briefing us on what to do if the train was disabled by a missile or any other circumstance. Their preparedness was remarkable; among other measures, they provided us with survival gear should we be required to spend a long night in a Ukrainian forest in February.



9780316598484_PromiseMeAmerica_int_1P.indd 245 7/17/26 1:51 PM

There were other precautions as well, thanks to the Ukrainians. An extra diesel engine was attached to our train in case there was a problem with the supply of electricity to the train (Ukraine's electric grid was a frequent target of Russian drones). Another countermeasure was simple but effective: As we departed on our long ride, a different train left the station on a parallel route, going at the same speed, just to sow confusion in case anyone was tracking us.[23]

On a strategic level, and now on a personal level, I was impressed with the Ukrainian rail system, Ukrzaliznytsia. It was a vital lifeline for a besieged country. Its superb performance under unimaginable strain had done a lot to keep Ukraine in the fight during the first year of the war. A large percentage of what Ukrainians needed came in by rail. With commercial air links canceled, the best way to get supplies into Ukraine was the old-fashioned way, and it worked well. The trains had been hauling freight all year long, quickly repairing damage after Russian strikes, with barely an interruption to service.

The railroad also was essential for moving people in and out. More than two hundred diplomatic visitors had come in through the route I was traveling, to present their credentials (Ukraine called it "iron diplomacy").[24] Trains also helped refugees to flee, during the brutal early days of the war. More than four million people (including a million children) had been evacuated, without a single fatality. There were special trains for medical workers and firefighters, moving them quickly around the country, bringing their skills to the fight. The Russians understood very well how important the railroad was to Ukraine; already, 353 railroad workers had been killed in the war.[25]

As I settled into my cabin, I reflected on what trains had always meant to me, long before Amtrak became a significant part of my life. As a kid in Scranton, I heard the trains clattering all the time, an economic lifeline at a time when the anthracite coal of northeastern Pennsylvania was needed to heat homes and companies around the Eastern Seaboard. The Delaware, Lackawanna and Western was the



9780316598484_PromiseMeAmerica_int_1P.indd 246 7/17/26 1:51 PM

main railroad serving Scranton in my childhood; then it was reorganized into the Erie Lackawanna in 1960. The sound of a train whistle was exciting; it signaled economic activity, news, and gossip, all at the same time. It was like the arrival of an old friend.

Railroads began to lose money in the 1950s and '60s as highways were built around the country and Americans, including me, fell in love with their cars. But they continued to play an important role moving goods and people, among them a young senator who needed to get home to Wilmington from Washington to tuck his kids in. They never lost their meaning to people in cities, living near the stations. As a senator, I was always happy to support Amtrak, and as president, I had included significant support for Amtrak in the American Rescue Plan, understanding that trains provided environmental benefits over cars and were essential to economic development along their corridors.

At times, a train trip could still be intensely meaningful. One of my very early memories as a child was my excitement at seeing the "Freedom Train," a traveling exhibit that carried America's founding documents around the country. That train also advanced the cause of desegregation in the South by skipping stops where local officials refused to allow Black and white visitors into the cars at the same time.[26]

And I remembered the terrible sadness of the day in 1968 when Robert F. Kennedy's family escorted his remains from New York to Washington, on a slowly rolling train that drew huge crowds of mourners (including five thousand people in Wilmington). On days like that, it felt like a train was a more profound and meaningful form of transportation.[27]

Now, once again, I hoped that a railroad journey could bring people together and help shore up democracy. The train's steady clickety-clack was bringing us closer to Kyiv, and that familiar old sound was helping me to fall asleep after a very long day. It felt reassuring, like the sound of a promise being kept.



9780316598484_PromiseMeAmerica_int_1P.indd 247 7/17/26 1:51 PM

## KYIV

In the morning, we were already approaching the western outskirts of Kyiv as the sun was rising. It was uplifting to look out the window and see Ukrainians out in the streets, walking or waiting at bus stops on their way to work. Just beginning a new day, like me. It was Monday, February 20. I had been to Kyiv eight times, but this was the first time I was entering by train.

We pulled into the Kyiv-Pasazhyrsky station at 8 a.m., and when I stepped off the train, I was glad to see the smiling face of our ambassador, Bridget Brink. I was smiling, too, having come five thousand miles over the past twenty-two hours. A beautiful sunny day was beginning, and I was wearing a blue-and-yellow tie, the colors of the Ukrainian flag. "It's good to be back in Kyiv," I said, with more than a little understatement.[28]

There were cars for us to get into — but with a twist. Whenever I traveled to a foreign country, I took American cars everywhere. We would fly our own vehicles over, and our personnel would drive them, for maximum security. This time we were getting into Ukrainian vehicles, driven by Ukrainians. The Secret Service didn't like it, but that was another decision made to decrease the size of our footprint and make it harder to detect our presence. The cars brought us to the Mariinsky Palace, the official presidential residence, where we arrived at 8:30. I was met at the front door by President Volodymyr Zelensky and his first lady, Olena Zelenska. As usual, he was wearing the clothing of an embattled military leader — a black sweatshirt, dark green pants, and boots. "Thank you for coming," President Zelensky said to me. I answered by saying, "It's amazing to see you," and asking after his children.[29]

There was a small cluster of staff, security, and media, and I spoke briefly.

I reminded President Zelensky that a year prior, we had spoken on the phone as Russian planes were in the air and Russian tanks were



9780316598484_PromiseMeAmerica_int_1P.indd 248 7/17/26 1:51 PM

rolling across Ukraine's border. We could hear explosions in the background, and he had asked me to gather the leaders of the world. "Ask them to support Ukraine." I said I would. And we had.

As we hung up that night, President Zelensky said that he didn't know when we'd be able to speak again. At that time, the world was bracing for the fall of Kyiv, and perhaps the end of Ukraine.

Now I was there in Kyiv, and proud to be able to say, "One year later, Kyiv stands. And Ukraine stands. Democracy stands. America stands with you. And the world stands with you."

And to cement that commitment, I announced another half-billion dollars of assistance to Ukraine, including a large amount of ammunition for the artillery systems we had provided. I promised we would have Ukraine's back for "as long as it takes."[30]

After the Zelenskys escorted me into the palace, I signed a guest book, with the fighting phrase "Slava Ukraini!" or "Glory to Ukraine!"

President Zelensky's ten-year-old son gave me a note he had written in perfect English. It read: "Dear President, Thank you for helping my father to save us all. Kyrill Zelensky. 10 years. Kyiv." At the bottom of the page, he had drawn a picture of a rocket fired by a launch vehicle. What he had drawn bore a remarkable similarity to the High Mobility Artillery Rocket Systems (HIMARS) that the US had begun sending to Ukraine several months earlier. That a ten-year-old was drawing air-defense systems the way American children draw cars and trucks was a powerful reminder of what it means to be a nation under siege. I hung that picture on the wall of my private study for the remainder of my term.

We then went into a series of meetings: a one-on-one between Zelensky and me, then a larger bilateral meeting with his top military advisers. The Ukrainians also honored me by unveiling a plaque to commemorate my visit.

In the late morning, we left the palace for a short drive to St. Michael's Golden-Domed Monastery, a remarkable shrine with gilded tulip-shaped domes, on a hill overlooking the Dnieper River. It holds



9780316598484_PromiseMeAmerica_int_1P.indd 249 7/17/26 1:51 PM

deep meaning for Ukrainians, as an ancient religious site going back roughly a thousand years, to the Kyivan Rus, the first East Slavic state, and as the current headquarters of the Ukrainian Orthodox Church. Naturally I wanted to see it, so I deviated from our strict schedule for a few minutes, went inside, and had a chat with the religious leaders there. Crowds were growing outside the monastery, as people began to figure out that I was in Kyiv. At this point, the news was breaking around the world as well.[31]

As we exited the monastery, I could hear a noise familiar to all Ukrainians — the shrill sound of the air-raid sirens. I was later told that a Russian plane with a possible capacity to launch missiles had just taken off toward Ukraine, triggering the alarm.[32] This was a moment that produced real concern, because my security team wanted me to head toward a nearby shelter immediately. But our Ukrainian hosts had been through a lot of moments like this, and within a minute or so, they were assuring us that we had a little time before the plane became a threat.

President Zelensky and I then walked to a memorial to Ukraine's fallen heroes, killed in fighting during Russia's invasion of Crimea in 2014. There we laid a wreath together. These few minutes were important; they showed the two presidents unafraid, standing together in every sense as air-raid sirens wailed in the background. I wanted to project exactly that message to friend and foe alike. When the United States of America stands by you, that means something.

It had been a whirlwind visit, but already time was running short. I still had one important stop to make. Our last visit was with the extraordinary men and women of the US embassy. These dedicated professionals of the Foreign Service had been serving in this hardship post — one of the hardest postings in the world at the time — and working around the clock to support the mission, ever since the war began. I had much to thank them for. I arrived around noon and expressed a nation's gratitude in my remarks.



9780316598484_PromiseMeAmerica_int_1P.indd 250 7/17/26 1:51 PM

About forty-five minutes later, it was time to go back to the train station. Our train left at 1:10, and we crossed back into Poland around 8 in the evening. In a sense, this was an even more dangerous moment, because the Russians, like everyone, now knew my exact location. That said, they also knew that for them to act would have set off World War III. Still, that didn't preclude the chance for mischief, or an accident, and we were relieved to make it to the border without incident.

We came into the same station where we had begun the long train journey, Przemyśl Główny, at 8:45. From there we quickly drove to Rzeszów-Jasionka Airport. Already on social media, the Ukrainians were telling the story of my visit to the world and celebrating the Ukrainian train that had brought me there. They called it Rail Force One.[33]

## WARSAW

Shortly after 10, we took off and headed to Warsaw for the next stage of the trip. We landed at 11:13.[34] It would be hard to top the excitement of Ukraine, but I was also glad to be returning to Poland, to build on the momentum we had created.

Every time I came to Warsaw, I marveled at its transformation from the gray city it had been under long decades of Russian domination, into a thrilling cultural and commercial hub of the new Europe. It was hard to believe that the Warsaw Pact had once been signed here. Now Poland was a stalwart NATO member, one of the many realignments that Vladimir Putin stewed over.

Unsurprisingly, he was not happy on the anniversary of his failed invasion. While the military result remained inconclusive, the world was nearly unanimous in its condemnation of his shameless effort to take over a sovereign nation. In the UN, in an October 2022 vote denouncing his annexation of parts of eastern Ukraine, only four nations had sided with him; 143 had sided with Ukraine.[35]



9780316598484_PromiseMeAmerica_int_1P.indd 251 7/17/26 1:51 PM

On February 21, the day after my Ukraine visit, Putin delivered a delusional speech in which he claimed that the West had started the war, posing an "existential" threat to Russia. He added, spitefully, that Russia was suspending its participation in New START, through which we hoped to reduce nuclear tensions. That was the latest irresponsible act from a leader who was all too casual about mentioning his nuclear options, as his fortunes fluctuated on the battlefield. That same day, I answered him with a speech of my own. A year earlier, I had spoken from Warsaw's Royal Castle in the dark aftermath of Putin's invasion. Now I returned to the same place to celebrate a year of resistance and solidarity, as the world's democracies stood up to a bully. With the Poles, we had organized a meeting of the "Bucharest Nine," composed of nations that had formerly been dominated by the Soviet Union. We did not want to go back to that history, or to the even darker history that preceded it. The solemnity of the meeting was intensified by the fact that it took place on Ash Wednesday, and I attended with a cross of ashes on my forehead, after a private Mass at my hotel.

The Poles knew very well that the Second World War had begun when Hitler invaded their homeland on September 1, 1939, after years of appeasement from the world's democracies. Although the Russians later became our allies, after Hitler double-crossed them, they too invaded Poland, from the east, on September 17, 1939. None of this history was lost on the Poles, who were fiercely independent now, and among the most generous contributors to NATO.

Now we were fighting another war, the largest in Europe since 1945. But this time, the democracies were standing strong, together. The crowd was sensational. They were lining the streets, pumped up for the occasion. They roared as I said:

> One year ago, the world was bracing for the fall of Kyiv. Well, I have just come from a visit to Kyiv, and I can



9780316598484_PromiseMeAmerica_int_1P.indd 252 7/17/26 1:51 PM

> report: Kyiv stands strong! Kyiv stands proud. It stands tall. And most important, it stands free.[36]

I was proud of America's leadership, and of all that NATO had done to prove itself, after years of decline and inattention during the Trump years. Instead of causing it to fall apart, the Ukrainian crisis made NATO stronger, bigger, and more united. As I put it, Putin "thought he'd get the Finland-ization of NATO. Instead, he got the NATO-ization of Finland — and Sweden."

I knew the road ahead would still be brutally hard — for the Ukrainians more than for anyone else. But they also had a tremendous fighting spirit, as I had seen for myself, the day before. For them, the cause was truly existential, to use the word that Putin had misappropriated in his speech. As I put it in mine:

> It's simple. If Russia stopped invading Ukraine, it would end the war. If Ukraine stopped defending itself against Russia, it would be the end of Ukraine.

The trip home was considerably easier than the trip over, thanks to the comforts of Air Force One. I was relieved to get back — but I think our traveling companion from *The Wall Street Journal*, Sabrina Saddiqui, was even more relieved. She was eager to be reunited with her infant daughter, Sofia, for whom she had been pumping milk throughout our extraordinary journey. A seasoned reporter, she kept filing her reports along the way, but finally, when we got to Warsaw, she tweeted a photo of her milk container, saying it was her only souvenir from Kyiv. It nearly blew up the internet. I was glad we had taken such good care of her, and I think that more than a few Ukrainian moms had enjoyed this unexpected aspect of the story.[37]

All in all, it was a great trip, giving support to a friend and rallying eastern Europe behind a shared cause. It also kept American



9780316598484_PromiseMeAmerica_int_1P.indd 253 7/17/26 1:51 PM

attention on a difficult war, far from home, now entering its second year. I was grateful for all that my staff had done, under the cloak of secrecy, to make it possible. The entire journey had been brief—less than four days—but it had been meaningful, close to the front lines of a Cold War that had not ended as neatly as we often told ourselves. To put it simply, we showed up. That's what friends do.

HBG



9780316598484_PromiseMeAmerica_int_1P.indd 254 7/17/26 1:51 PM

CHAPTER TWELVE

# OCTOBER 7

The news came crackling in, late on the night of October 6, 2023. It was just after 11 p.m.—6 a.m. in Israel. There were reports of attacks inside Israel, up and down its thirty-seven-mile border with Gaza, the Palestinian territory. Hundreds of attacks, committed by fighters from Hamas, the terrorist organization that runs Gaza, as well as some fighters from smaller terror groups like Palestinian Islamic Jihad. The presidency is a twenty-four-hour-a-day job, and so I was awake when the secure phone rang in my study.

The reports were spotty at first and almost didn't seem believable: thousands of Hamas fighters swarming across the border in more than a hundred places, using paragliders and motorcycles or simply crossing over on foot. Thousands of rockets being fired into Israel, drones disabling security cameras, bulldozers plowing through high-security fences. Horrifying details of random slaughter.

It is never easy to grasp the full extent of a tragedy in the earliest minutes of its unfolding. But as the details emerged, the terrible toll suffered by Israel started to become clear. It also became clear



9780316598484_PromiseMeAmerica_int_1P.indd 255 7/17/26 1:51 PM

just how much we had all lost — Israelis, Palestinians, Americans, and everyone else hoping for a long-overdue season of peace in the Holy Land.

That peace was not theoretical. Indeed, unknown to most, historic progress may have been only weeks away.

A big idea had been percolating during the meeting of the G20 in New Delhi in the second week of September, one with the potential to transform the Middle East. The idea was an India–Middle East–Europe Economic Corridor, or IMEC, a huge new rerouting of global trade from South Asia to Europe through the Middle East. It was brilliant in its simplicity. With IMEC, we would plan a trade route, alternating ships and trains to move goods from Mumbai in northwestern India through the Arabian Peninsula and across the Middle East toward the Israeli port of Haifa. From there, ships could take goods to the ports of southern Europe.[1] If IMEC could be built, it would not only help us to compete with China. It would bring India, Saudi Arabia, the other Gulf States, Jordan, the West Bank, and Israel into a real trade network and perhaps reverse the famous adage, "When goods don't cross borders, soldiers will."

The conversations around IMEC had a remarkable effect. They allowed for the possibility of a new economic and political alignment to emerge. It involved many nations, but at the heart of it was a profoundly important new relationship, between Saudi Arabia and Israel.

I had been working for just such an outcome since the summer of the previous year, when I had made a three-day visit to Israel, the West Bank, and Saudi Arabia. In so doing, I became the first president to visit the Middle East since 9/11 without American troops engaged in combat in Afghanistan or Iraq.[2] That felt symbolically important.

In Israel, I was welcomed as a steadfast, lifelong friend. Indeed, early in my administration, I had given a green light to a program to coordinate defensive measures between Israel and nearby countries to defend against incoming drones from Iran — limiting the threat posed by Iran and its proxy, Hezbollah, was something both Israelis



9780316598484_PromiseMeAmerica_int_1P.indd 256 7/17/26 1:51 PM

and Sunni Arab states cared about. I was flattered to be presented with the Presidential Medal of Honor by Israel's president, Isaac Herzog.

I was also determined to push forward the cause of peace, anchored by the opening between Israel and Saudi Arabia. Israel's prime minister at that time was Yair Lapid, who led a centrist party and aligned with a more conservative politician, Naftali Bennett. They had agreed to share power to box out former prime minister Benjamin Netanyahu. The alliance was a fragile one, and I did not want to interfere in their difficult politics. But before my press conference with Lapid, I urged him to endorse a Palestinian state. He had yet to do so, not because he didn't believe in it but because no Israeli prime minister had done so in years — and much of the Israeli population, after years of terrorism, had soured on the idea.

When we took the lecterns at the Waldorf Astoria in Jerusalem, Lapid said, in response to a question, "About the two-state solution, I haven't changed my position. A two-state solution is a guarantee for a strong democratic state of Israel with a Jewish majority."[3] It was an important moment.

Lapid later articulated his vision for two states in a speech at the UN General Assembly. "I could not agree more," I said in a tweet, afterward.[4]

Undeniably, Israel faced real security threats. Iran was increasing its support for the terrorist groups surrounding Israel, from Hamas in Gaza to Hezbollah in Lebanon to several terror groups in the West Bank, as well as the Houthis in Yemen and the militant groups organized across Iraq. They all had the same mission — to eventually remove Israel from the map. In Israel, I met with the country's security leaders and reviewed a remarkable new defense technology, jointly produced by Israel and the United States, called Iron Beam. It sounded like science fiction, but it had proved capable of taking down missiles and drones with lasers, a more cost-effective approach than the missile defenses we had jointly developed to date.



9780316598484_PromiseMeAmerica_int_1P.indd 257 7/17/26 1:51 PM

After my Israel visit, I went to the West Bank to see Mahmoud Abbas, the head of the Palestinian Authority, whom I have known for years. There were a few ceremonial elements, including a visit to the Church of the Nativity in Bethlehem. More importantly, there was also a lot of candid conversation. I urged him to reverse once and for all the odious policy of paying enhanced social benefits for the families of Palestinians who kill Israelis in terror attacks. He promised me that he would do so. He also warned that the window for a peace agreement was closing soon — but he offered no new ideas or initiatives of his own. So I asked him to consider a new approach, linked to the process with Saudi Arabia. Abbas to this point had never supported any recognition of Israel by an Arab state unless all his demands were met first. He also had almost no relations with Saudi Arabia. I promised him that we would not leave the Palestinians behind in a deal, and that they would have a seat at the table. He said he would support the process, and he asked me to convey that to the crown prince later that night. Another huge step forward.[5]

I then returned to Israel and flew from Tel Aviv to Jeddah, in Saudi Arabia, for the third phase of my visit. I was not the first president to fly directly to Saudi Arabia from Israel (George W. Bush had flown to Riyadh), but I was the first to fly to Jeddah, and I flew on a day when we were announcing a significant breakthrough — that Saudi Arabia was opening its airspace to all civilian carriers, including those from Israel.[6]

That would shave hours of flying time from flights between Israel and Asia, and it was the result of months of hard diplomacy by my team.[7] The Saudis agreed to open their skies after we unlocked a landmark deal between Saudi Arabia, Egypt, and Israel involving the control of two Red Sea islands. For the first time since the Camp David Accords were signed in 1978, the deal removed multinational forces from the islands and allowed for their development for tourism and diving. Prime Minister Lapid had handed me a letter to carry to Jeddah for the crown prince, affirming Israel's commitments under



9780316598484_PromiseMeAmerica_int_1P.indd 258 7/17/26 1:51 PM

the deal and charting a path to normalization, including a role for the Palestinians.

It had not been an easy decision to go to Jeddah. I had been outraged by Saudi Arabia's complicity in the murder of the journalist Jamal Khashoggi, and one of my first decisions as president was to release the intelligence assigning the blame to Mohammed bin Salman, the crown prince, often referred to by his initials, MBS.

But the relationship between our countries was more important than my own relationship with MBS. MBS was not yet forty years old; presidents would be dealing with him for decades to come. I knew I would take a lot of heat for that, and I did. However, the world needed a more peaceful, better integrated Middle East. Over that night and the next day, before MBS and other Gulf leaders, I talked about how much we had to gain if we all worked together more effectively. We had a shared reason to be worried about Iran's nuclear capacity, and that fear was shared by Israel. We also had a great deal to gain by cooperating in other spheres, including expanded educational initiatives, liberalized trade, cooperation in advanced technologies, easier travel, and fewer restrictions on the rights of women.

The war in Yemen had also stopped, thanks to a cease-fire my team brokered earlier in the year. The Saudis confirmed to me their commitment to the truce. The crown prince also told me he was ready to move toward ties with Israel, together with a series of bilateral agreements that my team would put together over the coming months, including on defense relations, civil nuclear cooperation, and technology. We also discussed the need for an important role for the Palestinians in the deal.

It felt like a new beginning. Or as King Abdullah II of Jordan called it, around the same time, a "new vibe."[8]

By the morning of October 7, 2023, that hope was shattered. The normalization of relations between Saudi Arabia and Israel represented an existential threat to Hamas and sponsors of terrorism like Iran. Saudi Arabia is considered a critical Arab and Muslim country,



9780316508484_PromiseMeAmerica_int_1P.indd 259 7/17/26 1:51 PM

and home to Islam's holiest shrines. Its acceptance of Israel would have led to a wave of regional normalization. A group like Hamas, which did not recognize Israel's right to exist and whose charter argued for the obliteration of Israel, would have been isolated, its reason for being nullified by those it saw as its natural allies.

First thing the morning of Saturday, October 7, I convened my team for a briefing. The group included Jake Sullivan, my national security adviser; Jon Finer, his deputy; Jeff Zients, who was now my chief of staff; Secretary of State Tony Blinken; Secretary of Defense Lloyd Austin; Chair of the Joint Chiefs of Staff General Charles Q. Brown Jr.; Director of National Intelligence Avril Haines; CIA Director Bill Burns; and Brett McGurk, my national security coordinator for the Middle East and North Africa. The horror of the attack was becoming clear. Shocking crimes were committed by Hamas against innocent Israeli concertgoers and kibbutzim residents. It was terrible to contemplate how these peaceful young people and families were subjected to the most grievous assaults and indignities — torture, rape, dismemberment, murder. These were war crimes.[9] Perhaps the greatest emotional blow was the taking of so many hostages. Hamas had abducted approximately 250 people, including women, the elderly, and children. Some were as young as ten months, others as old as eighty-six. It was one of the worst hostage crises in history. The fact that they were abducted on a Jewish holiday, Simchat Torah, made it even more abhorrent. That morning, we learned that fourteen Americans had been killed, and twenty were still missing.[10] We would soon learn that twelve of those missing were hostages as well. I directed my team to engage with their Israeli counterparts — military to military, intelligence to intelligence, diplomat to diplomat — to make sure Israel had what it needed.

My next call that morning was to Israel's prime minister, Benjamin Netanyahu, one of several I would make to him that day and in the days ahead. There was not much I could do except note the grim carnage and convey my fullest sympathy and support to Israel. I shared with him what I would share with the world that afternoon, that the



9780316598484_PromiseMeAmerica_int_1P.indd 260 7/17/26 1:51 PM

United States stood with the people of Israel in the face of this terrorist assault, and that Israel had the right to defend itself and its people. I wanted him to know my determination to ensure that a day like this would never happen again, and that we would not permit a wider war to break out — because Israel's many enemies were already circling. I had known Prime Minister Netanyahu long enough to know that he often projected confidence, even when profoundly vulnerable.

In this case, the vulnerability was twofold. First, Israel's military, for the first time I had ever seen, was on its back foot, disoriented and in disarray. The Israelis were largely focused on moving forces to the south, where the attacks had occurred, leaving other areas dangerously exposed. Meanwhile, Hezbollah — Iran's proxy in the north — had thousands of their elite Radwan forces stationed on the border. Second, Israel's air defenses were not at full strength. If Iran had chosen to fire its missiles and drones (as it would do in April 2024), many would have found their targets.[11]

Had Iran and Hezbollah launched an attack in coordination with Hamas, it could have been an existential blow to Israel.

Netanyahu's political vulnerability would also shape the conflict. Bibi had long boasted that he was uniquely able to protect Israelis from their enemies. This had allowed him to survive his many corruption scandals. Now, he was exposed for failing to do precisely what he had promised. Even in the earliest minutes, I had a feeling that his response would be overwhelming — to compensate for what was close to dereliction of duty on his part.

My job as president of the United States was to support America's interests and America's allies. Every democratic country gets to choose its leader, and I work with those leaders. My commitment to Israel is deep and long-standing. Increasingly, since Netanyahu's return to power at the end of 2022, I felt that the work of protecting Israel meant protecting it both from its enemies and itself.

I had certainly had my differences with Bibi in the past. Yes, he was very smart and charming. He was a political operator, and always



9780316598484_PromiseMeAmerica_int_1P.indd 261 7/17/26 1:51 PM

willing to work with the Israeli far right to shore up his shaky coalition.[12] He was also willing to stick it to his allies if it served his own goals. During a 2010 trip I made to Israel as vice president, Netanyahu announced new West Bank settlements, a counterproductive move that is inconsistent with international law. This followed a pattern of similar stunts that Israel's governments had pulled with US Secretaries of State James Baker, Condoleezza Rice, and Madeleine Albright, who famously told one of her deputies: "You tell Bibi that he needs to stop worrying about his right wing and start worrying about the United States."[13]

I remember sitting in a conference room with Netanyahu and his lieutenants on one of my subsequent trips to Israel, and conversation turned to the subject of the settlements. At this point, Netanyahu rose from the table and walked to the window. "Come with me, I want to show you something."

He wanted me to stand with him at the window so he could show me how close the settlements were to Jerusalem.

I refused to stand up, and the tension in the room became palpable.

Bibi continued, "Mr. Vice President, come to the window, let me show you."

And I simply replied: "Bibi, sit down. I've been to the window, I've heard the stories. You have to do what's right, and what's right for Israel is to get back to the peace process and a two-state solution."

He and I could be direct with each other, but there wasn't a ton of trust. I was also worried about Bibi's Trump-like tendencies. He could play fast and loose with the truth, and thought nothing of bending democratic institutions to serve his personal needs. Despite a thin electoral majority, he had quickly turned his victory into an attempt to weaken the Israeli Supreme Court, in order to prevent it from looking into his unsavory financial dealings.[14]

I had often described America's internal divisions as a struggle for the "soul of the nation." In many ways, the same phrase applied to Israel. If Israel's Supreme Court was weakened, it would further



9780316598484_PromiseMeAmerica_int_1P.indd 262 7/17/26 1:51 PM

encourage corruption and harm Israel's international standing. I also worried that it would complicate our peace efforts, because a weakened judiciary would encourage more settlers to occupy land in the West Bank, making a peace agreement impossible. In the early summer of 2023, even as we were moving toward normalized relations between Israel and Saudi Arabia, Bibi approved 5,700 building permits for Israeli settlers, dealing another blow to the peace process.[15] Every time that happened, it weakened the Palestinian Authority, which had confirmed to me that it wanted a peace based on the Oslo Accords, and strengthened Hamas, which did not want any peace at all. If we were going to deepen the progress of 2022, we needed strong partners, respected at home and abroad. And as I was leading an international coalition to defend democracy in Ukraine, I wanted partners who were equally committed to democratic values. But life is complicated; sometimes we have to work with the partners who are assigned to us, and Bibi was a partner I knew well, leading a country that had suffered the single-deadliest day for Jews since the Holocaust.

I'd always felt an affinity for Israel. I liked reading about Israel's early days. I was proud that Harry Truman was the first world leader to recognize Israel, only eleven minutes after its creation in 1948. I was impressed with the heroism of Israel's founders, and how they built a thriving and progressive state in the face of perpetual adversity. In a sense, I "grew up" alongside Israel.[16] That commitment deepened as I grew older. Even though Delaware is home to fewer than twenty-five thousand Jews, it feels as if I know all of them. In the Senate, I felt privileged to have mentors like Abraham Ribicoff and Jacob Javits. I gave frequent speeches on Israel as a senator, and occasionally got into mild trouble by calling myself a Zionist.[17] When in Europe, I brought my family to visit the sites of the death camps, like Dachau, to instill in them a strong sense of "never again."[18]



9780316598484_PromiseMeAmerica_int_1P.indd 263 7/17/26 1:51 PM

After I got off my call with Netanyahu and debriefed my team, I called Vice President Harris, to update her. I also placed a call to King Abdullah II of Jordan, a good partner to the United States and a good friend. Jordan, like Israel, is a small but critically important country, friendly to America but also beholden to its large population of Palestinian refugees, and located at the crossroads of the region (or as Abdullah likes to say, "between Iraq and a hard place").

I also made calls to Senator Cory Booker and Representative Dan Goldman, who each happened to be in Israel at the time, to make sure they were safe.

I then went to the State Dining Room and delivered remarks, pledging America's support for Israel. In those remarks, I said, "This is not a moment for any party hostile to Israel to exploit these attacks to seek advantage." However, I wanted to make sure that warning got through to a very specific audience that needed to hear it. Specifically, Jake Sullivan and I asked Brett McGurk and energy security adviser Amos Hochstein, who had recently negotiated a maritime deal between Israel and Lebanon, to ensure that my words would reach Hezbollah.

On October 10, flanked by Vice President Harris and Secretary of State Blinken, I gave another speech, voicing my feeling that Israel had both a right and a duty to respond. I described the atrocities committed and then put a name to them: "sheer evil." I asked Congress to fund the national security of our critical partners — Israel and Ukraine. And I offered a blunt warning: "To anyone thinking of taking advantage of this situation, I have one word: Don't." To reinforce my words — or, rather, my word — we had deployed two aircraft carrier strike groups to the eastern Mediterranean.[19]

Things were moving quickly in Israel. On October 11, Bibi reached a deal with Benny Gantz, a centrist former defense minister, to form an emergency unity government. Tensions were running extremely high, and it felt as if the Middle East was on the verge of a total conflagration.



9780316598484_PromiseMeAmerica_int_1P.indd 264 7/17/26 1:51 PM

A near miss occurred that same day, when the Israelis came to believe that Hezbollah was about to launch a massive attack across Israel's northern border from Lebanon. Prime Minister Netanyahu had a recommendation from his security team to preempt the attack, through an Israeli strike in Lebanon that would eliminate Hezbollah's leadership. My national security team was on the phone with the Israelis all morning, assessing the facts, before I got on the line with Bibi. He told me he had to strike; in fact, the planes were already airborne. With him on the line was his military command, as well as two former Israeli chiefs of defense who had just joined Netanyahu in a so-called war cabinet to help guide Israel's response. I could hear the tension in their voices, as no Israeli leader could risk another surprise.

Shortly after October 7, Hezbollah had begun to launch rockets into northern Israel. But we had seen no signs of a pending ground attack, and Israel's strike might have started the broader regional war that I was determined from the start of this crisis to prevent. I urged Bibi to stand down. "You're guaranteeing a Middle East war if you do this." He took my advice and turned his planes around in midair. It was the right call, at a precarious moment.

On October 13, I held a video call with the families of the American citizens being held hostage by Hamas. Roger Carstens, my special presidential envoy for hostage affairs, convened the call. First, I heard from the family of Noya and Carmela Dan, a twelve-year-old girl and her eighty-year-old grandmother, who, along with three other family members, had been taken captive. Telling me about Carmela, her family described a woman who was a mother, grandmother, and community matriarch. They would both be found dead a week later. I spoke to the family of Hersh Goldberg-Polin, a promising young man who had been using soccer to bring Israeli and Palestinian children together. He was the type of young man who could help build a better, more unified future for the region. We would later learn that after eleven months in captivity, Hamas had executed him. At the time,



9780316598484_PromiseMeAmerica_int_1P.indd 265 7/17/26 1:51 PM

however, we still held out hope. I heard stories of grandmothers, toddlers, taken from their homes, now somewhere in the tunnels under Gaza. I wanted to give everyone a chance to express their grief. One woman just screamed into the video screen, "Do something! Do something!"

At some point, one of the folks from the State Department, trying to help keep me remotely close to schedule, said that I'd be leaving the call but that the State Department team would stay on the line to answer any questions. I cut them off: "Who the hell are you? I'm the president of the United States; I'm staying on this call." I've been known to have a bit of a temper, and what was most likely to bring it out of me was when I felt that people didn't have their priorities — or mine — straight. In that moment, there was nothing more important for a president to do than to listen to American citizens.

After that meeting, I told my team to do whatever it took to get the hostages out. That had to be my focus, because it seemed like the only way to resolve the crisis. So long as Hamas was holding hostages in its tunnels, Israel was never going to quit fighting to free them, or agree to a cease-fire. My team soon opened a channel with Qatar and Egypt, two nations that could serve as mediators with Hamas, focused first on rescuing women and children, trying to save as many lives as we could.

This was one of the ways I was trying to get ahead of a problem that I knew was coming soon, and that would complicate our efforts to bring our hostages home — the overwhelming military response we expected from a furious and embarrassed Netanyahu government. Israel had been done a terrible wrong. But there were early reasons to be apprehensive about the response that was coming. The rate of civilian casualties — already too high — was sure to climb quickly as the Israelis sought to avenge themselves on an enemy that was very skilled at hiding among civilians. I went on *60 Minutes* and said that I thought it would be a "big mistake" for Israel to occupy Gaza.[20]



9780316598484_PromiseMeAmerica_int_1P.indd 266 7/17/26 1:51 PM

I realized that I had to go to Israel to see the damage for myself, do what I could to assuage Israel's pain, and have a clear-eyed conversation with Bibi about next steps.

## JOURNEY TO A WAR ZONE

I had already been to one war zone, earlier in the year, with my train journey to Kyiv. Now I was getting ready to go to another. When I told my team on October 11 that we had to plan a trip as soon as possible, they looked at me as though I might have been joking. Rockets were raining on Israel from two directions. No, I told them — I needed to be on the ground. I had to see the Israelis. Look them in the eye. Let them know they were not alone, and also slow down their thinking and decision-making amid the worst crisis Israel had confronted in decades. I just had to go — period. But once again, I would be testing the Secret Service and our advance teams with a rapidly organized visit to an embattled nation.

I resolved to go on October 18, and once my Israeli hosts agreed to that date, we set about planning the details, urgently.

But every day it felt like the violence was close to spinning out of control. There were rockets coming in from Hezbollah in Lebanon, and most of the militias around the Middle East were issuing threats to us, warning of attacks if we intervened. Israeli planes were bombing Gaza and enforcing a blockade, which was already having a serious effect on access to food, water, fuel, and electricity. The West Bank was under an Israeli lockdown. World leaders like Pope Francis and the archbishop of Canterbury were outspoken, calling on both sides to de-escalate. On October 16, Iran threatened a preemptive attack against Israel, raising tensions considerably.[21]

I hoped to use the influence of the United States to walk back some of these tensions. The trip would involve a visit not just to Israel but also to Amman, where I'd see Mahmoud Abbas, together with



9780316598484_PromiseMeAmerica_int_1P.indd 267 7/17/26 1:51 PM

King Abdullah II of Jordan and President Abdel Fattah el-Sisi of Egypt. With Sisi, I had hoped to discuss the sensitive issue of allowing some Gazans to flee the fighting by coming into Egypt. This was the first war in decades where people just had nowhere to go. I knew Sisi would resist, but the aim was to save lives and get people out of harm's way. When I was vice president, we had helped civilians flee from cities ISIS controlled, such as Mosul, before the fighting began.

These meetings would not happen. On October 17, the day before I was scheduled to arrive, an explosion rocked al-Ahli Arab Hospital in Gaza, killing an estimated two hundred people. At first, the widespread assumption was that Israel had bombed the hospital, leading to global fury—and the cancellation of meetings I had scheduled with Arab leaders the next day, in Jordan.

Later, it emerged from British and French intelligence sources that the rocket had not come from Israel at all but from an errant rocket launch by Palestinian Islamic Jihad, a terror group separate from but often allied with Hamas.[22]

What's tragic about missing the Amman stop (because of the disinformation about the hospital) is that it was intended to find ways to avert the humanitarian crisis to come.

The hospital attack also troubled my security team, who worried about the safety of the trip. Many other advisers counseled me against investing presidential credibility in what might be a failed effort to change anything on the ground.[23] But I was determined to go. I issued a statement denouncing the hospital attack, and stuck with the plan.[24]

My main goal in going was to show solidarity, as a friend and ally. I also hoped that I could shape the course of events in the months ahead. The Israelis still had not entered Gaza on the ground. Israel's military, however, was preparing a massive three-division assault into Gaza City. I wanted to slow down that process so we could offer advice from some of our top military experts with decades of experience in urban combat. I wish I could say there was an easy answer, or



9780316598484_PromiseMeAmerica_int_1P.indd 268 7/17/26 1:51 PM

a way to fight Hamas with precision and special forces alone. Unfortunately, Hamas had built tunnels stretching multiple stories below ground and running longer than the Manhattan subway system. The entrances were in residences, schools, and hospitals. To find them, Israel had to move in on the ground, facing ambushes and booby traps and snipers.

On the flight over, I reflected on my earlier trips to Israel. I was there in 2006, as an election monitor on a day that Palestinians went to the polls. As it turned out, that was not a great day for the peace process, because Hamas did unexpectedly well. Within a year, they would clash with their Palestinian rivals, Fatah, and take total control of Gaza.[25] But it was one of my first visits that left the most lasting memory. It was in 1973, also an unsettled time. Tensions were rising, and the Yom Kippur War, another surprise attack, was weeks away. I was fortunate to meet the redoubtable Golda Meir. She was prime minister at the time, but also a living link to Israel's founding generation. (She happened to be born in Kyiv, a city that would be much on my mind in the years ahead.) When we met, she asked me if I was worried about what was headed Israel's way, and I said, "Yes." She replied with an answer I've never forgotten: "Don't worry, Senator, we Israelis have a secret weapon in our fight: We have nowhere else to go."[26]

When Air Force One landed at Ben Gurion International Airport in Tel Aviv on October 18, both Prime Minister Netanyahu and President Herzog were on the tarmac to greet me. Bibi and I shared a warm embrace. Regardless of the disagreements we'd had in the past or the ones that were to come, he and his nation had suffered a great loss, and I felt for him as the leader of Israel. When I greeted President Herzog, he said to me: "God bless you for protecting the nation of Israel."[27]

On the Ayalon Highway in Tel Aviv, billboards featuring my picture and reading "Thank you, Mr. President" had appeared. One billboard featured my face and, in big red letters, echoing my one-word warning to those who might take this moment to attack Israel, the



9780316598484_PromiseMeAmerica_int_1P.indd 269 7/17/26 1:51 PM

word "Don't." A commentator on one of Israel's right-wing television channels apologized on air for questioning my commitment to Israel in the past.[28]

Israelis were feeling alone in the world, and besieged, and I could tell how much it meant to them to see Air Force One in their country, carrying a president who cared about them.

On the way over, I had worked hard on a speech, to be delivered in Tel Aviv, to convey the candid thoughts of a friend about how to chart the best way forward.

I knew it would be hard to break through to a people suffering from so much anguish and rage. In my private conversations with Bibi, it was clear that the shock had not worn off. He presented me with gruesome photographic evidence of the atrocities committed by Hamas. I shared his revulsion and outrage. So indelible were the images that some of what I saw made it into the speech I gave in Tel Aviv, when I described "children slaughtered…babies slaughtered… entire families massacred…rape…bodies burned alive."[29] But still, I counseled prudence in the response. Constraining their behavior would give Israel a crucial moral standing in the negotiations to come.

In that same speech, I tried to convey what I passionately believed, based on a lifetime of experience, and my specific memories of the mistakes the United States had made after 9/11. With Israel preparing a ground invasion of Gaza, I asked them to make difficult but critical distinctions. They needed a surgeon's precision in the dark days ahead. It was perfectly understandable to feel rage, I said, but I cautioned them, "Don't be consumed by it." I remembered how we had sought justice after 9/11, almost desperately. To an extent, we found it. I was in the Situation Room on the day we took out Osama bin Laden, and it was important to close that chapter.

But I reminded my audience that we "also made mistakes." I didn't specify them, but the world is quite aware of all the ways we overreached in Iraq. At times, we ignored the rules of war that we ourselves



9780316598484_PromiseMeAmerica_int_1P.indd 270 7/17/26 1:51 PM

had written — particularly the rules governing the interrogation and treatment of enemy prisoners. It goes without saying that I'm proud of the men and women we asked to go to Iraq — a group that included my own son. But we should never send our troops into a war without a precise mission and clear rules of engagement.

I hoped that this honest and reflective approach would make an impression on my hosts. "The vast majority of Palestinians are not Hamas," I reminded them. I hoped we could all keep our eyes on a higher prize, and I was specific about naming it: "We must keep pursuing a path so that Israel and the Palestinian people can both live safely, in security, in dignity, and in peace. For me, that means a two-state solution."

There was not a receptive audience for that argument. The plight of the hostages was foremost in the minds of most Israelis, but there was very little appetite for any negotiation with Hamas among Israel's leadership.

Meanwhile, the situation in Gaza was worsening. Israeli air strikes were causing casualties, and Israel had shut Gaza's border gates entirely. That meant that for a time, nothing could enter, including through Gaza's border with Egypt, which was subject to Israeli inspections. Israel had imposed a siege on the enclave. I told the Israelis in no uncertain terms that I would never support this tactic, and the gates had to open. They complained that Hamas would use any humanitarian assistance for itself and its war effort, imperiling efforts to release the hostages. In the end, I did secure an important promise from Bibi to end the blockade on assistance into Gaza — but I knew it would be difficult to deliver that assistance into a territory that was still effectively controlled by Hamas. I announced that we too wanted to do our part and would be providing $100 million in aid to Gaza. I also persuaded President Sisi of Egypt to allow a small number of trucks to bring desperately needed aid into Gaza.[30]

The violence in the Middle East was beginning to deepen political divisions at home. In each party, there were disturbing fissures around



9780316598484_PromiseMeAmerica_int_1P.indd 271 7/17/26 1:51 PM

the cause of Israel. Antisemitism had been on the rise in the precincts of the right; that had been painfully clear in the ugly rally at Charlottesville in 2017, when neo-Nazis and Hitler sympathizers marched alongside Klansmen and Confederate sympathizers, chanting, "Jews will not replace us."

Yet Israel was becoming divisive on the progressive left as well. On campuses, especially, there was a growing school of thought that Israel was a racist "occupier" of Palestinian lands, in the worst traditions of the old European empires, oppressing an indigenous people. There was a naiveté to these protests, which often conflated very different historical circumstances. But there was also an edge to them — many of the marchers seemed to believe that they could wish Israel out of existence, simply by chanting slogans about a Palestine that stretched "from the river to the sea." That slogan was more than a little provocative, as it glibly threatened to displace a people who had been displaced so many times in their history.

I was from a different generation than the protesters, of course. For me, Israel had always symbolized something profoundly important. From the ashes of the Holocaust, Jews had gathered together from around the world to build a new and democratic society, based on an extraordinary resilience. Since 1948, they had survived many invasions, surrounded by adversaries on all sides in a uniformly hostile region. Far from crushing Israel, each war had instead strengthened it. Now, Israel possessed overwhelming military superiority, and that power opened up new possibilities, if put to the cause of partnership and progress.

Flying back to Joint Base Andrews, I knew that the trip had been necessary and had achieved several critical objectives.[31] But I also knew that we were looking at a long slog in the months ahead. Ukraine was already costing a huge amount of money. Now we would need to ask Congress and the American people to support another conflict. And we would need to do so at a time when Congress was dysfunctional and leaderless.



9780316598484_PromiseMeAmerica_int_1P.indd 272 7/17/26 1:51 PM

In September, Speaker Kevin McCarthy and I had negotiated an agreement to raise the debt ceiling and keep the government open. That was a triumph, from my point of view—and a validation of how Washington is supposed to work. The people send us there to get things done, not to just complain about the other side. But the mere fact that Kevin McCarthy had cut a deal with me was enough to put a target on his back with the MAGA crowd. In the aftermath of our agreement, they led a push to end his speakership, less than nine months after it began. On October 3, four days after keeping the government open—a success, not a failure—Speaker McCarthy was deposed by his own party. The divided Republicans could not find a replacement—at least, not at first (Mike Johnson was finally selected twenty-two days later, on October 25). Once again, MAGA was showing that it knew how to tear down better than build up. Privately, I worried about the message all this chaos was sending to our friends and foes. We were trying to project America's strength at home and abroad—and specifically to bolster democracy in Ukraine. But there were days when democracy needed a shot in the arm in Washington.

After my trip to Israel, I needed to reach out to the American people directly, so I scheduled an Oval Office address on the next day, October 19.

Once again, I was writing an important speech on the plane. But despite the rush, it did the job. I appreciated a comment from former Speaker Nancy Pelosi: "President Joe Biden masterfully presented the case that American leadership on the world stage is necessary."[32]

The next day, thanks to the incredible work of my team, we secured the first release of hostages—an American mother and daughter. I called them immediately from the Oval Office and heard their cries, and their thanks to the United States. The broader deal, however, for women and children, snagged on hard-line Hamas demands. I sent my negotiators to the region and worked the phones with Bibi, and the leaders of Qatar and Egypt, trying to get past the final stumbling blocks.



9780316598484_PromiseMeAmerica_int_1P.indd 273 7/17/26 1:51 PM

A week later, on October 27, Israel launched a ground attack into Gaza, and the conflict deepened. It was a smaller attack than we had envisioned before my visit, and it had built-in pauses to assess progress in the hostage talks. Day after day, the Israeli troops engaged Hamas militants and uncovered Hamas tunnels, but the constant bombardment and scarcity of aid only deepened the misery of civilians, whose casualties continued to rise dramatically. That awakened global interest and, increasingly, condemnation.

Internet and phone service was frequently severed throughout the Gaza Strip; this made it difficult for civilians and local reporters to describe their ordeal (no international reporters had been allowed into Gaza). The fighting was far from straightforward, either in the terrain (Israeli troops discovered tunnels hundreds of miles long under Gaza) or in the ability to find the enemy (because Hamas fighters could easily melt into the population).[33]

That did not remove Israel's imperative to avoid the killing of innocent civilians. But it was a uniquely difficult war from the start. Our own military advisers assessed that no military had ever confronted such a nearly impossible challenge. Meanwhile, the Palestinians were trapped in a battle zone, with nowhere to go. Complicating things further, Jordan and Egypt weren't opening their borders to Palestinian refugees. Conditions quickly deteriorated, and the world's anger grew at the devastation inflicted by Israel's campaign. So did my own. At the same time, Israel faced an adversary who deliberately embedded its soldiers in and under hospitals, schools, and apartment buildings.

Naturally, my team was working around the clock on diplomatic solutions. Against long odds, they were making progress. The diplomacy was complicated and required many intermediaries, including Qatar and Egypt. But it made a difference. After weeks of high-level talks, we scored a significant success, at a time when we needed some good news.

On November 21, we announced a temporary cease-fire and the release of 50 Israeli hostages — women and children — by Hamas.[34]



9780316598484_PromiseMeAmerica_int_1P.indd 274 7/17/26 1:51 PM

Israel, in turn, would release 150 Palestinian prisoners. Both sides would agree to a truce of at least four days, to begin November 24 (it went six days, until November 30, and resulted in the release of more than 100 hostages). The cease-fire deal also enabled a surge of aid into Gaza, with up to 200 trucks coming in daily.[35]

One of the hostages released as part of that first group was Abigail Edan. She was an American citizen, and I actually knew her great-aunt, Liz Naftali. Abigail was just three years old at the time of the attack, and she watched as her parents were both murdered by Hamas terrorists. Her father died shielding Abigail's body with his own. Two of her siblings were able to hide in a closet until they were rescued, fourteen hours later. They thought Abigail was dead. But she had managed to wiggle out from under her father's lifeless body and, covered in his blood, run to a neighbor's home, seeking safety, which she found for a while. Hamas ultimately broke into that home and took her hostage, where she remained for nearly two months. Often in the dark, with little food, no running water, forced to remain silent. She turned four in captivity. I wondered if she knew her birthday had passed. One of the most joyful things I did as president was to call Liz after the first release of hostages, to tell her that Abigail was once again in Israel, and safe.

Five months later, I was able to welcome her to the White House, along with her surviving brother and sister and several cousins. Every day, the staff of the Navy Mess prepared a platter of fresh chocolate chip cookies, which I would place outside the Oval Office, for guests. Each cookie was individually wrapped, and the cellophane sealed with a gold sticker stamped with the seal of the president. These were always a big hit, and in a running joke, whenever General Mark Milley came for meetings, he would grab a handful, always saying, "For the troops." They were especially in demand with all the children running around.

I welcomed Abigail with a hug. She seemed in every respect a happy, rambunctious four-year-old. I remember looking out of the



9780316598484_PromiseMeAmerica_int_1P.indd 275 7/17/26 1:51 PM

Oval window at one point to see Brett McGurk pushing her on the swing set that we had there for the grandkids. It was an incongruous sight — a senior diplomat in his dark suit and polished shoes pushing a four-year-old on the swing.

I can't begin to imagine the depth of the pain and trauma inside that little girl; she had experienced things that nobody should ever have to experience. But there was clearly a reservoir of strength as well. At that moment she was smiling. We all were.

Two days after the announcement of the cease-fire, November 23, was Thanksgiving. That seemed fitting. While we had a long road ahead of us, I was deeply grateful for this new progress.

The House finally had a speaker in Mike Johnson, and that meant we could pass some bills. It wasn't easy, but we had successfully moved a stopgap funding bill known as a continuing resolution through Congress on November 14–15, which I signed immediately. That would keep us in business until early 2024.

Ukraine was still embattled, but its troops were fighting bravely. And the pause in Gaza was huge. It allowed Israelis and Palestinians to take stock of the situation — giving calmer voices a chance to speak. It also allowed me to turn my attention to some vital long-term American interests. For while we were trying to calm the conflict in Gaza, I was preparing for one of the most consequential meetings of my presidency, with China's Xi Jinping in San Francisco.



9780316598484_PromiseMeAmerica_int_1P.indd 276 7/17/26 1:51 PM

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

# A SUMMIT IN SAN FRANCISCO

In the wake of John F. Kennedy's stunning victory in the 1960 campaign, the outgoing president, Dwight D. Eisenhower, met with the president-elect and tried to explain the challenges of the job he was handing over to JFK, twenty-seven years his junior.

Eisenhower knew something about logistical challenges, having planned D-Day while supreme commander of all Allied forces in Europe. But as he explained to the young Massachusetts senator, nothing really compared with the size of the problems he would face in his new assignment. The very nature of the presidency meant that only the hardest decisions should reach the Resolute Desk. "There are no easy matters that will ever come to you as president," Eisenhower counseled, adding, "If they are easy, they will be settled at a lower level."[1]

I thought of that quote from time to time, on days when we were trying to solve multidimensional problems, across multiple fronts — all at once. November 2023 was especially crowded. As we were



9780316598484_PromiseMeAmerica_int_1P.indd 277 7/17/26 1:51 PM

pushing for a cease-fire deal in Gaza to see hostages safely returned, and coordinating a new round of assistance for Ukraine, we never lost track of the most consequential bilateral relationship in the world.

And that relationship was not with Russia. Indeed, Russia has been in decline for fifty years—a decline that Putin has accelerated. Its economy is smaller than Italy's.[2] It was once a great scientific power, responsible for putting the first man into space. But that was a long time ago. Today, Russia generates a relatively small number of patents, roughly twenty-five thousand a year, or about one for every twenty earned by America's scientists.[3]

China, on the other hand, is responsible for an enormous amount of scientific progress—and more than a million patents a year. That is far ahead of the United States (we generate a bit more than six hundred thousand) and one of many reasons that the way we interact with China will define the twenty-first century. By nearly every metric, China is coming up fast, thanks to its industrial capacity, its mastery of supply chains, its huge workforce, and increasingly, its military capacity. From my first days in office, I recognized that this era of US-China relations would be different from past eras. China was stronger, and our relationship would be more contentious, given our divergent interests. My aim was to secure America's interests and to compete and win, while also managing that competition so as to prevent catastrophe.

I had a lot of work to do.

When I came into office, Sino-American relations were at a low we had not seen since the McCarthy era. COVID had complicated the relationship, understandably. But the US response had been immature and inconsistent. At first, President Trump praised China for its exemplary cooperation and transparency (when they were anything but transparent). Then, sensing a different mood in his base, he reverted to using insulting racial epithets, calling the pandemic the "China virus" and the "kung flu."[4] While there were legitimate reasons to criticize China's lack of transparency at the outset of the pandemic, playground taunts did little to improve the situation.[5]



9780316598484_PromiseMeAmerica_int_1P.indd 278 7/17/26 1:51 PM

As I had made clear throughout my campaign, this was unacceptable. Surely we could be clear about our priorities and bring a high level of attention to our most serious and competitive relationship. Year after year, China came closer to achieving parity with us, and in many categories, they easily outperformed us. China had developed an enormous manufacturing capacity — three times that of the United States. Today, it dominates the production of batteries, electric vehicles, solar panels, drones, robots, fourth-generation nuclear reactors, and many other industries of the future. Over the last generation, China has built a highway system twice the length of our own, a high-speed rail network covering more miles than the rest of the world's high-speed railways combined, and a huge array of deepwater ports. It generates more electricity every year than the United States and the European Union combined.[6]

Troublingly, it has also turned serious attention to the manufacture of weapons, a pattern that picked up pace under my predecessor. In 2017, China became the world's greatest shipbuilder (it can now build two hundred ships for every one of ours). It has greater missile stocks than we do, hypersonic weapons, and the world's largest navy.[7]

This is more than a rivalry; increasingly, it's a threat. But the threat is complicated, because our economies are deeply intertwined, and China's leaders know that any war between China and the United States would be catastrophic. In other words, the threat can be managed, by prudent leadership. We will inevitably compete; but we can compete in a way that gives us both room to grow. It's a most serious, vital relationship.

Accordingly, I ordered a detailed review of US-China policy at the outset of my administration. I wanted to know what, exactly, we were inheriting, and how we could creatively build upon it. It was obvious that Donald Trump had been overmatched by the difficulty of managing a complicated bilateral relationship. The trade wars that he launched in 2018 had been damaging to both China's economy and our own, and American consumers had borne the brunt of it.[8] He



9780316598484_PromiseMeAmerica_int_1P.indd 279 7/17/26 1:51 PM

had promised that the tariffs would reduce the US trade deficit with China and bring back manufacturing. Predictably, they did neither. In the United States, about three hundred thousand jobs were lost, farmers went bankrupt, and manufacturing declined even further. A study by the Federal Reserve Bank of New York found that between 2018 and 2020, the trade war cost American companies $1.7 trillion of their value. Assessing the tariffs in 2020, *The Washington Post* wrote, "Trump's actions amounted to one of the largest tax increases in years."[9]

While American bank accounts were shrinking, China was gaining traction in other ways. During the Trump years, it aggressively expanded its Belt and Road Initiative. Between 2017 and 2021, while we were internally distracted and divided, nearly a hundred nations signed up to be members of the BRI. Nothing brought that distraction into sharper relief for me than the fact that on January 6, 2021, as rioters attacked the Capitol, yet another nation — the Democratic Republic of the Congo — pledged to partner with China.[10]

There were many reasons to worry about China's success in building so well and so far from its shores. These infrastructure projects, including significant new harbors (some in our hemisphere), were clearly an economic threat to the United States, but many of the new installations had a potential for military use as well.[11] In 2017, a huge Chinese naval base opened in Djibouti, off the Horn of Africa, a choke point in a vital shipping route. In 2020, another large naval base was taking shape in Cambodia.[12] A year before that, a partnership was announced between Peru and a Chinese entity, to build a major deepwater port north of Lima, in our own backyard.[13]

These harbors, bridges, and roads would certainly boost China's economy as its leaders sought to dominate the world's shipping lanes and supply chains. But it went beyond that. Chinese economic control imposed political costs as well. China's leaders were obviously not interested in democracy and civil society. As they invested heavily in places like Africa, they gained considerable sway over a continent that



9780316598484_PromiseMeAmerica_int_1P.indd 280 7/17/26 1:51 PM

had struggled to deliver good governance to its peoples. If we cared about how the world governed itself — and we did — then we wanted to compete effectively against an emerging Axis of Autocracy, including China, Russia, Iran, North Korea, and various proxies of those states.[14]

Toward that end, we needed to do some building of our own.

## LATTICEWORK

During the early months of my administration, there were signs that the Chinese were going to be difficult adversaries in the years ahead. In March 2021, China imposed new election rules on Hong Kong that weakened its democracy by ensuring that pro-Beijing "patriots" would control its government councils.[15] Naturally, we objected, and Secretary of State Tony Blinken promised that we would "take action against egregious violations of democracy and human rights in Hong Kong."[16] Later that month, an unusually tense exchange between Chinese diplomats and our own in Alaska left little doubt that our countries were far apart. With surprising arrogance, they insisted that their country was simply "unstoppable."[17]

But as it turned out, the Chinese were wrong. In fact, we had designed a very effective strategy for countering China, and it began to pay dividends quickly. It was largely spelled out in an article I had published in *Foreign Affairs* a year earlier, in which I promised that America would lead again by restoring our alliances, invigorating our democratic values, and out-innovating our adversaries. As I put it then, we needed "to build a united front of U.S. allies and partners to confront China's abusive behaviors and human rights violations, even as we seek to cooperate with Beijing on issues where our interests converge, such as climate change, nonproliferation, and global health security."[18]

But it was one thing to write an article; it was another to prove to our friends that we were back. Fortunately, our allies were quite



9780316598484_PromiseMeAmerica_int_1P.indd 281 7/17/26 1:51 PM

willing to welcome us into the fold — or more precisely, to the head of the table. Throughout 2021 and 2022, we made rapid progress by reaching out to them. From the start, I made it clear that Asia was a high priority for us, as a nation with a deep Pacific heritage of our own. Our team, Tony Blinken, Jake Sullivan, and my top China advisers — including Kurt Campbell, who was serving as my National Security Council coordinator for the Indo-Pacific and whom I later tapped to serve as deputy secretary of state, along with Mira Rapp-Hooper and Rush Doshi — designed a strategy of building "latticework" around the region. This was shorthand for a variety of new diplomatic initiatives that would modernize our alliances and knit together our partnerships, pooling our collective capacity to stand up to China.[19]

The results were impressive. With COVID in decline across 2021 and 2022, we seized the opportunity to do a lot of good work on the international front. An early place to begin was the elevation of the Quad, the on-again, off-again dialogue between four critically important nations with a strong interest in a peaceful, democratic Indo-Pacific: Australia, Japan, India, and the United States. One of my first diplomatic initiatives was a virtual meeting of the four leaders — Scott Morrison, Yoshihide Suga, Narendra Modi, and me — in March 2021.

Relations were immediately excellent — like our European allies, they were reassured and relieved to see that "America's back." Together, collectively, we pledged to produce a billion COVID vaccines by the end of 2022.[20] We then met in person, in Washington, on September 24, 2021. By that point, COVID had ceased to be a disincentive to meet — in fact, our cooperation in producing vaccines had brought us much closer together as we faced a common threat. The Quad continued to meet yearly at the leader level after that.[21]

A favorable dividend was a rapidly improving relationship with India. I had paid close attention to this relationship for decades, going back to my Senate days, and I was proud to shepherd a US-India nuclear agreement through the Senate in 2006. That had lifted the relationship to a higher level, and I fully intended to lift it some more.[22]



9780316598484_PromiseMeAmerica_int_1P.indd 282 7/17/26 1:51 PM

Although the United States has long-standing ties to India's rival, Pakistan, there were obvious reasons to build a stronger strategic partnership with the world's most populous nation. Our ties have naturally deepened in the years since the 1965 Immigration Act expanded India's immigration to the United States. The relationship has been improving in many other ways, including shared scientific projects (the NISAR satellite, which will help us to monitor climate change, is a joint US-Indian space venture).[23]

We also were drawing closer to Australia — a natural ally — through a new trilateral defense partnership between our two nations and the United Kingdom. Years of growing Chinese economic coercion had alienated Australia, along with Asian neighbors, and we were there to offer meaningful support. Naturally, the Chinese were enraged and called the new agreement "extremely irresponsible."[24] But they were the ones who had antagonized their neighbors, irresponsibly, and we were the ones offering reasonable solutions.

Another critically important piece of latticework related to two American allies who had never been able to draw very close to each other, because of bitter memories of the Second World War and other historical injustices. Japan dominated Korea from 1910 to 1945 and imposed various cruelties on the Korean people, including extrajudicial killings, a ban on the use of Korean languages, and sexual slavery for Korean women, many shipped to China and put into service of Japanese officers. These atrocities were impossible to forget, and difficult to forgive.[25]

But there were nevertheless many reasons to find a better path forward. From the US perspective, Japan and South Korea were both partners of the first rank, with innovative economies, thriving democracies, and an ever-growing defense capacity. They shared the same interests and worried about the same threats — particularly North Korea and its growing nuclear arsenal, and China's increasingly aggressive regional role. Yet their long memories of past conflicts had kept them from being true allies with each other.



9780316598484_PromiseMeAmerica_int_1P.indd 283 7/17/26 1:51 PM

I set out to change that. Once again, it turned out that all politics is personal. On April 16, 2021, I hosted my first in-person meeting with a foreign leader when I invited Prime Minister Yoshihide Suga of Japan into the Oval Office for discussions. We reaffirmed our support for "a free and open Indo-Pacific" and our "shared values, including human rights and the rule of law." We also specifically condemned any effort to change the status quo by the use of force — a reference to China's constant intimidation of Taiwan, and its use of coercion against other neighbors in the South China Sea.[26]

A month later, on May 21, I hosted another successful visit, this time from South Korea's president, Moon Jae-In. Again, we reaffirmed our commitment to the same goals of stability around the region and broad cooperation in other ways, including COVID and climate change.[27]

From these promising beginnings, it was natural to map out a more formal trilateral relationship, one that would move us out of the long shadow of World War II and into the broad sunlight of the twenty-first century. It took some time to work out, and there were many important steps along the way. North Korea inadvertently helped us along by threatening everyone and launching occasional missiles (one over Japan in October 2022 and more off North Korea's coast in March 2023 in response to joint US–South Korea military exercises). That got our attention, and brought us closer together, under a promise of American protection.

Our relationship with South Korea deepened with a successful state visit on April 26, 2023. In the course of that visit, I announced that any North Korean nuclear attack on us or our partners would result in the "end" of the odious regime of Kim Jong Un, and committed the United States and South Korea to stronger extended deterrence cooperation.[28]

A month later, Japan hosted the G7 summit, giving me ample opportunity to talk to their new prime minister, Fumio Kishida, and press forward with our plan of a genuine trilateral alliance. Finally, on



9780316598484_PromiseMeAmerica_int_1P.indd 284 7/17/26 1:51 PM

August 18, 2023, it all came to fruition as we signed an agreement at Camp David, establishing a new era of trilateral partnership between the United States, Japan, and South Korea, that would increase our security, technology, economic, and development cooperation, strengthening our alliance system in Asia as a whole. I considered it the most important Camp David agreement since the one that forged peace between Egypt and Israel in 1979.[29]

Needless to say, the new pact got China's attention. I believe Xi Jinping recognized that the situation had changed in the two years since I came into the White House. In place of the former chaos was a new discipline that was helping to advance American interests alongside those of our allies — at China's expense. Our effectiveness in Asia was facilitated to no small degree by the surge in global approval of the United States, from 34 percent when Donald Trump left office to 64 percent only a few months after.[30] We also strengthened security commitments to other friends in the region, including the Philippines, and began new work with smaller Pacific Island nations.[31]

Our Asia diplomacy was paying off in other ways as well. To a surprising degree, it was helping us on the other side of the world, in Ukraine. Japan and South Korea joined our coalition, supplying money and arms (while North Korea supported the Russians).[32] By the fall of 2023, it was quite clear: In a world with several different operating systems to choose from, most people, when given a real choice, would choose America's.

## TAIWAN, SEMICONDUCTORS, AND AI

Operating systems were much on my mind in 2023, a time of rapidly spreading new technologies, many of which were expanding our lead over China — despite impressive Chinese efforts to keep up. ChatGPT had been introduced, to much fanfare, a year earlier, on November 30, 2022. Over the next few days, millions of new users began to understand all the fuss about artificial intelligence. Within



9780316598484_PromiseMeAmerica_int_1P.indd 285 7/17/26 1:51 PM

two months, ChatGPT had one hundred million users. Within three years, it had eight hundred million users, more than twice the population of the United States.[33]

But there was much more to AI than ChatGPT. As engineers built ever-stronger AI models, with more complex cognitive capacity, those models began to learn many of the tasks that human beings had reserved for themselves — advancements that led to self-driving cars, ever-mightier search engines, and ubiquitous virtual assistants.

AI's promoters told us that these skills could lead us into a utopian future, in which machines solved all the problems of humanity. But skeptics warned that it could take us down a more dystopian path — familiar to fans of science fiction — in which the machines began to think for themselves, or chose terrible outcomes, with little regard for humanity. That was one of the reasons I had felt it was so important to remove AI from the chain of command that could possibly lead to the use of a nuclear weapon, a topic that I would raise with President Xi directly.

AI had spread rapidly during the first two years of my presidency, but we had been well prepared, creating a new directorate in the National Security Council called Technology and National Security. In year three, AI was accelerating even faster, and we had to confront all the ramifications of the new technology, at home and abroad. Domestically, we would see a proliferation of enormous data centers, required to supply the massive computing power to develop and run AI. That would be a challenge to manage well, in a way that protected the interests of small consumers, communities, and local environments. Accordingly, I began to invite in experts, and to give speeches addressing some of these concerns of the future.[34]

My sense was that Xi Jinping and I were both getting up to speed on AI around 2022. The United States had led the way in AI development, and I understood viscerally the strategic and economic imperative to maintain our edge over China. That meant imposing export controls on the most advanced semiconductors that power AI. We



9780316598484_PromiseMeAmerica_int_1P.indd 286 7/17/26 1:51 PM

did this in several stages, but the most meaningful moment came on October 7, 2022, when my Commerce Department issued a sweeping set of controls on the advanced AI chips and chip-manufacturing equipment coveted by China.[35]

But China's rising economic power brought with it a rising nationalism as well, and growing calls to seize Taiwan. I had been in the Senate when we passed the Taiwan Relations Act of 1979, which guaranteed Taiwan's security while offering formal recognition to the People's Republic of China. Since then, Taiwan had grown into such a successful society, with a flourishing democracy (unlike the one being strangled in Hong Kong) and an extraordinary economy, intimately tied to the world's proliferating information systems and AI.

The United States had something to do with that. In 1976, American engineers working for RCA had come to Taiwan, at the government's invitation, to teach sophisticated electronics, including the new technology of building semiconductors.[36] From these modest beginnings, drawing Taiwan and the United States together, a great industry was born, and the Taiwanese corporation TSMC grew into the world's largest manufacturer of semiconductors, critically important to the world's supercomputers. Although the technology was invented in America, Taiwan had surged to the head of the pack, making more than 90 percent of the world's most advanced chips.[37] It would be hard to overestimate their importance to the world economy. Estimates suggest that if that supply were to be cut off, America's economic output would plunge 11 percent, or twice the rate of the Great Recession, and the gross national product would decline by $2.5 trillion.[38]

That meant that our access to Taiwan's semiconductors was now a vital national security interest. It also meant that we needed to step up, to improve our own capacity to manufacture them, in case China took steps to cut off our supply. We were making inroads, notably through the CHIPS and Science Act, which was bringing the United States back into a sector of critical importance — and I was grateful to TSMC for committing to build chip-fabricating plants, or fabs,



9780316598484_PromiseMeAmerica_int_1P.indd 287 7/17/26 1:51 PM

in the United States. Getting this legislation passed, with bipartisan support, was an important strategic step.

The CHIPS and Science Act only deepened our strategic commitment to Taiwan, and at a press briefing in Japan in May 2022, I answered bluntly — perhaps too bluntly — when asked if the United States was ready to defend Taiwan if it was attacked: "Yes." Then I added, "That's the commitment we made." It was only a few words, but it went past our normal policy of strategic ambiguity and added some stress to US-China relations. But I meant it, and I wasn't sorry to be so candid, particularly in light of Russia's invasion of Ukraine. A Chinese attempt to seize Taiwan would be devastating and could start a regional war with other Asian nations. We put out a statement that our policy had not changed, and that calmed things down, but I thought it was good to reassert just how firm our commitment truly was. A few months later, in September 2022, I said it again on *60 Minutes*.[39] That said, my initial statement was a bruise to China, and one that Speaker Pelosi was soon to push on.

Ironically, TSMC was so good at making chips that they were also an important supplier to the People's Republic of China, a point that afforded some relief — many experts on China-Taiwan relations felt that this dependency created a disincentive to invade, known as a "silicon shield."[40] But I didn't want to take any chances. I have long understood Taiwan's strategic importance.

---

As artificial intelligence took off, it created a self-fulfilling prophecy of sorts — we needed ever-faster supercomputers, powered by ever-faster chips, to create ever more powerful AI models. Then the AI would create more knowledge about how to build more advanced semiconductors — which in turn would power faster AI.

The promise of the new technology is immense — with vast new computing power, we could bring unprecedented resources to the



9780316598484_PromiseMeAmerica_int_1P.indd 288 7/17/26 1:51 PM

search for a cure to cancer, or the development of new medicines to improve health and prolong life, or the quest for new solutions to climate change.[41] Those were forms of knowledge we would be happy to share with the Chinese. But we didn't want their AI systems to help them hack into our infrastructure, or probe our defense vulnerabilities. We called this putting "a high fence" around "a small yard" — meaning we would rope off only the technologies that were critical to our national security. This required great care in the execution — to carefully go through an immense range of new tools, find the dual-use chips that could help China's military, and restrict them. It was not always easy — the technology juggernaut Nvidia, which already had the largest market capitalization in history, objected to any limits on its ability to sell powerful chips to China, including those that would power cutting-edge artificial intelligence.[42]

In the end, I think we got it right. Remembering how slow the government was to regulate the internet in the 1990s, I wanted to get ahead of the problem. Toward that end, I asked my team to study AI carefully and make recommendations for the good of all Americans. I was already worried about the dependence of young people on their phones and laptops — we had seen a troubling decline in reading skills among schoolkids, stemming in part from the difficulties of remote learning during COVID. I didn't want our students to be even more addicted to their devices — especially with a new technology that could simulate human companionship, sometimes with tragic consequences.[43]

Accordingly, we began to define the rules and expectations that we wanted to put around a rapidly emerging field. In October 2022, my Office of Science and Technology Policy issued a blueprint for an AI Bill of Rights, declaring that AI should protect data privacy, prevent foreseeable harms, and be safe, effective, and transparent.[44] We had already seen the power of social media to degrade democracy and harm youth mental health. Here was a chance to do better with an even more powerful technology, still in its infancy.



9780316598484_PromiseMeAmerica_int_1P.indd 289 7/17/26 1:51 PM

In July 2023, I invited the heads of seven AI corporations into the Oval Office, and we hashed out a set of guardrails around safety, security, and trust.[45]

Even as we were negotiating voluntary commitments with the AI companies, I knew that industry action alone would not be enough to ensure good outcomes for Americans. AI would offer such challenges and opportunities for society that the government would have to do more. So in June 2023, I directed my team to begin working on a sweeping executive order to address the risks and benefits in the many areas where AI could affect society. I wanted it done quickly. The technology was moving so fast, the government would have to move faster than it was used to.

I kept tabs on the team's progress throughout the summer. When I met with them, I pressed them on the risks and opportunities — in biology, in cybersecurity, in the labor market. I was very concerned that deepfakes could make it impossible to know whether anything we heard from our leaders was true. At the same time, I was fascinated by the potential of AI to help realize my goal of ending cancer as we know it.

By October, they had a final draft for me to review. My special adviser for AI, Ben Buchanan, presented the order to me in the Oval Office, alongside Jeff Zients and Bruce Reed. The scope of the matter was daunting — a testament to just how far and wide AI's impact would be felt. The three of them walked me through how near-future AI systems would reshape cybersecurity, supercharging both offensive and defensive operations. They talked about AI's implications for biology, noting that AI offered huge medical promise but also exposed glaring loopholes in the United States' biosecurity apparatus. They underscored the degree to which the technology would affect the lives of ordinary Americans, upending the economy and posing a host of new questions on issues ranging from individual privacy to consumer protection.

I pushed them to make the executive order clear enough for any American to understand. My deep belief was that these were



9780316598484_PromiseMeAmerica_int_1P.indd 290 7/17/26 1:51 PM

questions not only of technology but of people. They cut to the core of the democratic experiment and to the government's obligation to serve its citizens, especially in times of upheaval. The landmark order directed historically significant actions to advance AI safety.

Frontier AI companies were required to share the results of their safety tests with the government before releasing powerful new models. The executive order established guardrails against fraud and deception, cyberattacks, and biological weapons hacking.[46]

As I said at the signing ceremony in the East Room, "This landmark executive order is a testament to what we stand for: safety, security, trust, openness, American leadership, and the unalienable rights endowed by our Creator that no creation can take away."

The question of which country will lead the way on AI has profound ramifications for our economy, our democracy, and our basic freedoms. America needs to be that country.

We face a high-stakes competition with China, whether we like it or not. The turmoil of the Trump years had created a complex burden for us. Obviously, we wanted to course correct and get back to traditional US statecraft, principled and direct. But it would take some time for the Chinese to enter into serious negotiations with us. To the Chinese, it seemed America's glory years were over. There was a phrase many Chinese leaders, including Xi Jinping, liked to use in speeches, which translates to "the world is undergoing great changes unseen in a century, but time and momentum are on our side." It was their shorthand way to describe China's rise and America's decline.[47]

Even the *perception* that the United States was in decline was a threat to our interests. So I resolved to show that the United States was not going away anytime soon.

Our day-to-day approach would be quite simple. We would communicate directly with the Chinese, in a clear manner that left no doubt about our intentions. It was obviously a competitive relationship, but competition did not necessarily have to lead to conflict (and it was vital that it did not). We would cooperate when we could—and climate



9780316598484_PromiseMeAmerica_int_1P.indd 291 7/17/26 1:51 PM

offered a perfect framework, drawing on the talents of both nations, and China's expertise in renewable energy. But we would compete as well. As the great Chinese military thinker Sun Tzu once wrote, "The skillful strategist defeats the enemy without doing battle."[48]

## THAWING OUT

By the end of 2023, these efforts had paid off and the scales had tipped. China was suddenly on the back foot after years of encroachment, and we had restored America's leadership on the world stage. With our principled diplomacy, we had won back our friends and created new networks to amplify our influence in the broad Indo-Pacific. We were also winning the race to master the technologies of the next generation — not only artificial intelligence, which was coming up fast, but also quantum computing.

Heading into 2024, I wanted to consolidate our many diplomatic victories. Despite the obvious hardships in Ukraine and the Middle East, we were reasserting American leadership and reminding the world that we adhered to well-defined values. Our most effective presidents understood that the White House was a bully pulpit — Teddy Roosevelt's phrase — and that it was an important part of the job to use it. In Roosevelt's case, he had arbitrated a difficult peace between Russia and Japan, winning a Nobel Peace Prize in the process, which is prominently displayed in the Roosevelt Room in the West Wing.

Asia was far more important to the United States a century after Roosevelt's intervention, and multiple benefits would flow from getting this fundamental relationship right; it was a relationship that still involved high levels of mistrust.

For example, when, in the summer of 2022, Nancy Pelosi announced that in order to show support for the democratically ruled island of Taiwan, she would be the first speaker of the House in a quarter century to visit it, it felt to the Chinese like an unnecessary provocation. For such a prominent US leader to make a dedicated trip



9780316598484_PromiseMeAmerica_int_1P.indd 292 7/17/26 1:51 PM

like this could suggest that we were increasing our support (though we were not) or contemplating a higher degree of diplomatic recognition (again, we were not). To the Chinese, Taiwan is an inviolable part of China and will inevitably be reunited with the mainland in the future.

To the United States, the situation is not as simple as that. As the historical record shows, Taiwan has often been governed by other powers. The Dutch were active there for long stretches of the seventeenth century, along with the Spanish and Portuguese, who named the island Formosa; even after their departure, Taiwan was considered distant and difficult to manage, because its indigenous peoples often resisted Chinese rule (it did not even appear on a Chinese map until 1683). One Chinese emperor, Kangxi, dismissed it as "a ball of mud beyond the pale of civilization."[49] In 1895, at the end of the First Sino-Japanese War, another emperor ceded it to the Japanese — who controlled it until the end of World War II.

But then in 1949, China's civil war produced a complex new reality. The losing side, the Nationalists (led by Chiang Kai-shek and supported by the United States), fled to Taiwan to establish an unassailable bastion, known as the Republic of China, oriented toward the West. The winning side, the Communists (led by Mao Zedong), took over the rest of China, as the People's Republic of China — but they could not dislodge Chiang. So two different governments took root, antagonistic to each other, one on the island and the other on the mainland. Each was Chinese, but with completely different political and economic systems, and more than a little hostility in the early years.

Over the decades, the United States, China, and Taiwan worked out a tenuous truce, which depended on a strategic vagueness that served all parties well. This, too, was a benefit that stemmed from the successful diplomacy of Richard Nixon (and also of Jimmy Carter, who deserves more credit than he usually receives). All parties would agree that there was "one China" but would accept the status quo rather than use force majeure to change it.



9780316598484_PromiseMeAmerica_int_1P.indd 293 7/17/26 1:51 PM

Understandably then, China's response to Speaker Pelosi's announcement was immediate. First, President Xi said to me, less than cryptically, "Those who play with fire will perish by it."[50] A few days later, the Chinese embassy put out a harshly worded statement laying the blame for Speaker Pelosi's trip at my feet: "The U.S. executive branch has the responsibility to stop such [a] visit. Since Speaker Pelosi is the incumbent leader of the U.S. Congress, her visit to and activities in Taiwan, in whatever form and for whatever reason, is a major political provocation to upgrade U.S. official exchanges with Taiwan. China absolutely does not accept this, and the Chinese people absolutely reject this."[51]

On one level, the idea that I could control Speaker Pelosi's travels was comical. (Ask anyone who has ever interacted with Nancy Pelosi if they felt like they were in charge!) But China's response was deeply serious. After Speaker Pelosi's visit, they dispatched warships and aircraft to conduct military maneuvers in the sea and airspace surrounding Taiwan, and then fired ballistic missiles into the waters nearby in a show of force. Several of these missiles landed in Japanese territory, which further elevated tensions.

Then, in late January 2023, China committed a serious blunder when it sent its spy balloon careening over the United States, heightening tensions again.

There were signs of a thaw in the summer of 2023. It doubtless helped that the Chinese needed American investment to prop up a sagging economy, with rising unemployment. But also, perhaps, enough time had gone by since the balloon incident. In June, Tony Blinken had a productive meeting with President Xi, and in July, China welcomed a one-hundred-year-old Henry Kissinger, the former national security adviser and secretary of state, with considerable pomp and circumstance.[52]

That brought back memories for me. It was in 1972, the year I first ran for the Senate, that Kissinger and Richard Nixon pulled off the diplomatic masterstroke of opening up China to the United



9780316598484_PromiseMeAmerica_int_1P.indd 294 7/17/26 1:51 PM

States — and by extension, to the world. From that moment forward, the United States and China would be critically important to each other.

I was happy to use the bully pulpit in my own way and host an important summit meeting with Xi Jinping on November 15, 2023. It was a busy time — we were intensely engaged in the Middle East as well as Ukraine. But a president has to think about the long-term future as well as the pressing needs of the moment — and I had a lot to say to Xi Jinping about how we could better manage our rivalry. I knew that he, too, was thinking decades ahead — he had an ambitious plan to lead China to a position of unchallenged greatness by the year 2049, the hundredth anniversary of the Chinese Revolution. I wanted to be ready with a vision of my own.

We both would be attending the annual meeting of the APEC (Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation) nations, a rotating conference that is held in a different city each year, hosted by one of the twenty-one member states. In 2023, it was our turn, and we had selected San Francisco for the honor. It was the perfect site, a wonderful polyglot city that had been built by Chinese Americans as well as many other immigrants. In the nineteenth century, Chinese laborers called it Jinshan, or "the Mountain of Gold."[53]

Not all reached the summit of that mountain of gold. The California Gold Rush brought great hardships to many, like the Chinese immigrants who were often at the bottom of the food chain. But they brought skill and perseverance to a society that did not always welcome them, and at times actively banished them. Many worked on the railroads that carried Americans across the continent to California, and in a sense toward Asia as well. I was proud to be celebrating all of these connections, with twenty other APEC leaders, on a peninsula jutting out into the Pacific Ocean.

Our group discussions would be quite public, but Xi's presence at the APEC meeting also offered a chance to talk privately. Accordingly, I invited him to meet with me in a beautiful estate just south of



9780316598484_PromiseMeAmerica_int_1P.indd 295 7/17/26 1:51 PM

San Francisco, in the town of Woodside. He accepted. I think both of us understood that it was a precious opportunity to recalibrate a relationship that, like the Chinese balloon, had drifted off course.

## FILOLI

My team had found an ideal setting for the summit. Filoli had an unusual pedigree. The fifty-six-room mansion was set on a magnificent 654-acre estate, with formal gardens, built between 1915 and 1917. It drew its unusual name from a set of beliefs held by its first owner ("FIght for a just cause; LOve your fellow man; LIve a good life").[54] That sounded like an appropriate credo for a meeting that was designed to repair an important relationship. Our planning was exceedingly precise — down to the number of steps we expected President Xi to take as we entered a room together.

The best thing of all about Filoli was its privacy. We needed a quiet place to discuss the future. It did not hurt that we were near Palo Alto and Silicon Valley, where so much of that future was already being written in code.

So I was right where I wanted to be as Xi's motorcade came through the gates and pulled up in front of the mansion. As he got out of his limousine, we shook hands, strolled up the steps, entered the house, and got down to business.

I had met Xi many times before, and that helped. A year earlier, almost to the day, I had spent three hours with him on the sidelines of a G20 summit in Bali. That was a good day, as Xi agreed to an idea that I proposed to him, calling for a new diplomatic channel to be opened between Jake Sullivan, my national security adviser, and Wang Yi, who wore two hats as Xi's national security adviser and minister of foreign affairs. That new channel, in addition to Tony Blinken's regular interactions with Wang, allowed us to explain our perspectives to each other as tensions were flaring up — as they inevitably will.

Xi and I had talked by phone on numerous occasions as well. Sometimes these calls were pretty direct, as when I told him we were watching Chinese support for Russia's war in Ukraine with extreme attention, not long after Putin's invasion began. Or Xi's warning to me, regarding Taiwan, not to play with fire. Before that, I met him many times as vice president, when he was rising up through the ranks before becoming general secretary of the Chinese Communist Party in 2012 and president in 2013. He and I had developed a comfortable way of speaking, even when we had hard truths to say to each other. These building blocks, assembled over many years, were meaningful to both of us and placed the relationship on a stronger footing.

There was no denying his intelligence, or his toughness. He was the most powerful Chinese leader since Mao, and like Mao, he had displayed an impressive combination of ruthlessness and folksiness while rising to command China's sprawling bureaucracy.[55] He had already overcome great obstacles, including the severe hardships inflicted on his family during the Cultural Revolution of the 1960s. His father, an important early leader of the new China, was arrested and jailed for many years, his imprisonment leading to extreme privations for his family.

But Xi persevered and rose up through the bureaucracy, thanks to his many talents and his capacity for hard work. As a young man, he had been sent abroad to learn from other systems. In 1985, he spent some time in the small city of Muscatine, Iowa, on a pretty bend of the Mississippi River, which delighted him because he had read Mark Twain as a boy in China. Xi was then a low-ranking official, but on his way up, and he was invited to Muscatine as part of a delegation studying American agriculture. During his stay, he charmed his host family, who put him up in their son's bedroom, complete with *Star Wars* wallpaper.[56] In return visits to the United States, he often talked about these early impressions of everyday Americans and went out of his way to reconnect with his Iowan friends.[57]



9780316598484_PromiseMeAmerica_int_1P.indd 297 7/17/26 1:51 PM

These were connections that we could build on, and in my own way, I too tried to show respect and understanding. I had not lived in China, but my long career in public service had coincided with China's remarkable rise in the world, and I had met or heard speeches from all its leaders, going back to Deng Xiaoping. It was Deng who had begun to turn China toward its distinct identity as a society with both communist and capitalistic qualities (as Deng put it, "It doesn't matter if a cat is black or white, so long as it catches mice").

Since then, the inexorable growth of China's economy (second only to our own) had been remarkable to witness. In a very short time, by the standards of world history, China had vaulted into the front rank of nations. That was, of course, a Chinese achievement. But the United States had helped in critical ways, including through a steady increase of trade in the 1980s and 1990s, culminating in a campaign to get China into the World Trade Organization, finally successful in 2001. China is today our third-largest trading partner, after Mexico and Canada.

Even as it grew into a formidable competitor, China always needed American technology, and the stability created by the US-led global order. Generations of American and Chinese business leaders had deepened the relationship, with the result that our two economies were intricately intertwined, even when our security interests were clashing.[58]

But China's rise had inevitably brought tensions to a series of administrations. In many ways, our strategic interests were not aligned. China was hardly a proponent of democracy — it had suppressed opposition groups (after promising not to do so) and tampered with legislative elections in Hong Kong. It was aggressively jailing huge numbers of the Uyghur ethnic group in Xinjiang Province, in what has been described as the largest incarceration of an ethnic or religious group since World War II. It claimed to be a defender of the world's underprivileged, in international settings like the UN, but it surveilled and arrested its own people, and hacked into computer



9780316598484_PromiseMeAmerica_int_1P.indd 298 7/17/26 1:51 PM

networks around the world, including, of course, our own. Chinese intellectual piracy was a significant threat to the United States and every other Western nation.[59]

As its military spending grew prodigiously, China was also flexing its muscles around its region, raising hackles in all directions. In the South China Sea, China's rapidly growing blue-water navy routinely intimidated ships from neighboring nations, including the Philippines, Taiwan, Vietnam, and Indonesia.[60] Using land reclamation, it was expanding or creating island chains that it could then repurpose for strategic reasons. Some of these artificial islands — called "the Great Wall of Sand" — were already small fortresses, able to support naval vessels and aircraft. Half the world's merchant marine traffic flows through the South China Sea — these were acts of aggression against international law and the basic free flow of commerce.[61]

And, as already mentioned, Taiwan remained a particular concern.

Xi and I had gone over every aspect of the relationship in our prior meetings, and this time was no different. Our bilateral meeting lasted four hours, after the usual protocols of opening statements followed by translations and follow-up questions. There is a formal rhythm to a summit, well understood by both sides and frankly tedious for long stretches. But at times significant breakthroughs can occur.

We discussed many topics, seated at a long table, with our top advisers alongside us. The fact that we were there at all was already a victory of sorts, after all the setbacks earlier in the year. But then we made real progress. China agreed to all the major proposals we put forward, including cooperation on curbing fentanyl production, a major concession.

---

When I came into office, the data showed that nearly one hundred thousand Americans were dying each year from fentanyl and other

opioid and synthetic opioid overdoses. A large number of these deaths were occurring in young people between the ages of eighteen and twenty-four.

These addictive and dangerously potent drugs were flowing into the country because precursor chemicals were being manufactured in China and shipped to Mexico, where they were assembled and then smuggled into the United States in powder form. At the North American Leaders' Summit in Mexico City in January 2023, I raised the issue with Mexican President Andrés Manuel López Obrador and Canadian Prime Minister Justin Trudeau — and one of the things we agreed on was to have a high-level trilateral approach to fighting synthetic opioids.

An initial challenge was that President López Obrador initially was skeptical that this fentanyl was being assembled in and flowing through Mexico. My homeland security adviser Liz Sherwood-Randall worked to show the Mexicans what was happening in their country in a way that didn't embarrass them or diminish their willingness to serve as partners in the effort. She was able to forge a relationship with President López Obrador and other Mexican leaders that allowed us to deliver meaningful intelligence and operational support to Mexico's military to stop shipments at their ports and borders. We also built a very strong collaborative relationship with Mexico's minister of justice and the head of their equivalent of the FBI. Once President López Obrador saw all of this, he began calling out President Xi publicly for China's role in this flood of narcotics. In addition to this diplomatic pressure, our government imposed sanctions on dozens of Chinese chemical firms and indicted multiple companies and executives.

These efforts caused what researchers called a supply shock. By the time I left office, there was far less fentanyl being smuggled onto America's streets, and the fentanyl that made it to the United States was less potent.[62] Most importantly, overdose deaths had dropped by 25 percent.[63] This story is not widely told, but our work saved tens of thousands of lives, and I'm immensely proud of that.



9780316598484_PromiseMeAmerica_int_1P.indd 300 7/17/26 1:51 PM

Another breakthrough in my meeting with Xi was that we restored communication between our top military commanders (which the Chinese had cut off after Nancy Pelosi's Taiwan visit). And as I mentioned, we also asked for a commitment to prevent AI from being deployed inside the chain of command relating to the possible use of a nuclear weapon.[64] This was important for several reasons, including the fact that it was a step toward nuclear arms control with a nuclear power that has generally refrained from signing treaties with us.[65]

There was a tense moment relating to AI, when Xi looked me in the eye and asked why we retained export controls on our most sophisticated chips. I looked right back at him and said, "Because we don't want you putting our best technology in your weapons and pointing them at Americans." Then I added, for emphasis, "I'm not going to sell you the chips."

It was a direct answer to a direct question. He blanched — I don't think he expected such a blunt response. But I meant it.

I also reiterated a point of high importance that I had made in previous meetings and calls with Xi: that we were watching carefully how they provided economic and technical support (but not weaponry) to Russia. And we got them to agree to some important new language about our shared commitment to managing our nations' competition with each other so it didn't spin out of control.

There were calm moments too. I was glad that we were able to find a little private time together. Midway through the meetings, Xi and I took a walk around the property together, with only our interpreters. This gave us a chance to speak more candidly. I had been well briefed by my staff, and at one moment, I asked him to convey my birthday wishes to his wife, Peng Liyuan, a well-known singer. Her birthday was coming up in a few days, on November 20 — which happened to be my own birthday as well. He seemed genuinely touched. I also showed him a photograph that my staff had found, of a thirty-one-year-old



9780316598484_PromiseMeAmerica_int_1P.indd 301 7/17/26 1:51 PM

Xi standing on the Golden Gate Bridge. His face lit up. Later, as his motorcade was pulling away, we joked about our limousines, and he let me look inside his, an impressive eighteen-footer made by a Chinese car company, Hongqi. For a minute we were two teenagers showing off our hot rods.[66]

I felt we had achieved what we set out to do. By the end of the afternoon, the world's two most important countries had drawn closer together. I spoke to the press afterward and explained why it had meant so much to me. "We're in a competitive relationship," I reminded my audience—I would never lose sight of that. But, I added, "my responsibility is to make this rational and manageable so it doesn't result in conflict. That's what I'm all about."[67] By identifying shared concerns and mutual interests and making real commitments, we had done just that. All in all, it was a good day's work.

In fact, the day was not yet over for Xi Jinping. That evening, he attended a gala dinner with US business leaders in San Francisco—a good sign.[68] As many observers later commented, he handled himself like a veteran politician, smiling, taking photos with guests, and shaking hundreds of hands. There was a palpable warmth to his speech, some of which I attributed to our progress earlier in the day. He promised to be "a partner and friend" to the United States, and compared our relationship to a healthy tree, "grown tall and strong." He also announced a new program of student exchanges, designed to bring fifty thousand young Americans to spend time in China, much as he had once learned from his experience in Iowa. As if this weren't enough, he also pledged that China would soon resume its old practice of sending pandas to American zoos. He received a standing ovation.[69]

## MANAGING THE COMPETITION

It will be a challenge to future presidents to manage AI responsibly while also dealing with a resilient adversary in China. We know how difficult it was to prevail against the Soviet Union in the long twilight



9780316598484_PromiseMeAmerica_int_1P.indd 302 7/17/26 1:51 PM

struggle of the Cold War. The struggle with China will not be any easier.

The problems of managing AI and competing with China are different but related. To meet AI's soaring energy demands, we will have to match China's explosive growth in clean energy, from solar and wind to long-range electric car batteries. We will need to maintain our edge on chips while doing all we can to see that most of the world runs on our AI. We will need to restrict access to powerful semiconductors and chip-manufacturing equipment, since those are fundamental to AI advantage. And we'll need to find and develop our own sources of critical minerals in case China decides to limit our access, vital work my State Department began by establishing a Minerals Security Partnership with a dozen countries and the European Union to end our dependence on China. We will need to look out for our friend Taiwan's safety and future, which are inextricably linked with the safety and future of AI. Through it all, we must continue to engage with China and pursue a fair business climate that allows us to grow and prosper.

We can take some pride in China's development over the last century, which we facilitated in many instances. But we should also be on guard against an adversary that is clearly hoping to achieve military, economic, and technological parity and even supremacy by its centennial in 2049. I take heart from the example of the past, and the great presidents who confronted very different threats simultaneously, dealing, as all leaders must, with the short-term emergencies that never stop but also looking over the horizon at long-term opportunities.

Thomas Jefferson had no end of domestic and foreign entanglements to deal with, but he saw the need to pursue the Louisiana Purchase when the opportunity unexpectedly presented itself, and to send Lewis and Clark into the interior to increase American scientific knowledge. Abraham Lincoln had his hands full in fighting the Civil War, but he understood the long-term benefits of investing in a transcontinental railroad and a first-rate system of public universities,



9780316598484_PromiseMeAmerica_int_1P.indd 303 7/17/26 1:51 PM

which would prove their worth long after he was gone. Franklin D. Roosevelt led the greatest military effort in American history but found time to design the United Nations, which in turn spawned other organizations (like the World Health Organization) that would protect the well-being of future Americans.

## THIS NEW OCEAN

As I thought about my predecessors and how they had addressed the long-term future, I was especially moved by a framed object that I kept in my West Wing study. It was given to me by Caroline Kennedy, my ambassador to Australia — and a key member of my circle of advisers. It was a copy of her father's speech about space exploration, complete with his handwritten annotations.

The speech was delivered at Rice University in Houston, on September 19, 1962, and it described outer space as a new kind of ocean, ready for human exploration. Kennedy specifically made the point that the United States needed to lead this exploration, precisely because we would do more than other countries to ensure that human rights would be respected in a rapidly emerging new field. As he put it, "We set sail on this new sea because there is new knowledge to be gained, and new rights to be won, and they must be won and used for the progress of all people."

He elaborated, in a language that is equally appropriate for AI, that the new science had "no conscience of its own," and could be easily diverted to the wrong purposes if not guided by us. As JFK put it, "Whether it will become a force for good or ill depends on man, and only if the United States occupies a position of preeminence can we help decide whether this new ocean will be a sea of peace or a new terrifying theater of war."[70]

The way Americans interact with the powerful technology of AI will depend very much on whether — and how — the US takes the lead. If we let down our guard and lose the race to China, the forms of



9780316598484_PromiseMeAmerica_int_1P.indd 304 7/17/26 1:51 PM

intelligence the Chinese government cares about — like surveillance — will take priority over the forms of intelligence that we care about. If we fail to put the right guardrails on the technology, humanity may get left behind.

Asia will remain a centerpiece of US foreign policy. China will try to continue its astonishing rise, toward a centennial celebration that will attempt to dwarf our 250th in 2026.[71]

But Chinese pride is not necessarily a threat to the United States. If we continue to defend our values and interests, while working with capable allies, we can build a future big enough for all of us to live in. During my summit with Xi Jinping in San Francisco, he described the earth as a planet "big enough for both of us." I subscribe to that view. Xi added another point that I agree with: For both China and the United States, it is simply "not an option" to turn our backs on each other, as we did from 1949 to 1972.

There will always be concerns to manage with a formidable competitor like China. For thousands of years, Chinese emperors felt that they ruled from the world's "hub and center," as one eighteenth-century emperor put it, as if they were ordained by heaven to command the destinies of all nations.[72] If left unchecked, they will presumably try to rebuild such an order. There is a decent chance that effort will begin in Taiwan, which will likely be the most important foreign policy challenge in the world over the next generation. We've seen Hong Kong's decline as an island of democracy. We don't want to lose another one.[73]

But we have strengths, too — and just as importantly, we have our allies and partners. Together, the United States, the European Union, Australia, Canada, India, Japan, Korea, Mexico, and New Zealand have a combined economy of $60 trillion — compared to China's approximately $19 trillion.[74] There is no reason we cannot build on these strengths, with ever-greater interoperability of our militaries, shared dedication to our values, and the cultivation of a Pacific community every bit as enduring as the Atlantic community that did so



9780316598484_PromiseMeAmerica_int_1P.indd 305 7/17/26 1:51 PM

much to preserve freedom in the second half of the twentieth century. Once again, we can be "present at the creation," as Dean Acheson phrased it.

There is no war between the United States and China. There never has been. Let's hope there never will be. If we remain vigilant and true to ourselves, we can show the way toward a shared future of prosperity for the entire world — a planet big enough for all of us.

HBG



9780316598484_PromiseMeAmerica_int_1P.indd 306 7/17/26 1:51 PM

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

# SACRED CAUSE

Early in the morning of April 15, 2023, I returned to my home in Rehoboth from a four-day trip to Ireland. The crowds there had been wildly enthusiastic, and the trip was an emotionally resonant one for me. At Knock Shrine in County Mayo, I was stunned to see Father Frank O'Grady, the former US Army chaplain who had administered last rites to Beau at Walter Reed National Military Medical Center. The sight of him brought tears to my eyes. At a heritage center, I was presented with a two-hundred-year-old brick from the site of my family's ancestral home. The visit concluded with an event in front of twenty-seven thousand people at St. Muredach's Cathedral in Ballina. The trip had restored my soul and revived my spirit, which I'd needed. I knew I was headed home for the fight of my political life. I left feeling I could be elected president in Ireland. Now I was about to find out if I could be reelected president in the United States.

After a few hours' sleep, I came downstairs to a home filled with cameras and lights and crew members. Mike Donilon and Anita Dunn were there, along with Rob Flaherty, my director of digital



9780316598484_PromiseMeAmerica_int_1P.indd 307 7/17/26 1:51 PM

strategy. It was time to record the announcement video for my reelection campaign.

The crew continued to set up in the dining room as I sat in the kitchen, reading over the script the campaign had prepared for me. I wasn't happy with it. I just didn't feel it had captured my voice. Or the urgency of the moment.

Mike and I worked for about thirty minutes while the crew waited. We settled on a one-word opening that I felt captured the urgency of the moment and so much of what was at stake in the country.

Freedom.

As the cameras rolled, I said that the question we were facing in the years ahead was whether we would have more freedom or less. More rights or fewer. I said that every generation had faced a moment when they had to stand up for democracy — and this was our moment.

I had thought long and hard about running for reelection. I knew the concerns about my age. I knew how hard it would be on my family. I knew how hard it was going to be, both doing the job of president and running for president. I had asked the hard questions of myself. Could I do it? Did I still want to do it? Was there anyone else to do it? I answered that yes, physically I would be able to do the job. And that not only did I want to do it, I wanted to do it more than ever. We had accomplished so much — I wanted to finish the job. And yes: I believed I was the best person to do it. I was the only person who had ever beaten Donald Trump. And I felt I was the best person to do it again.

The decision to run again had been, as always when I ran for office, a family decision. However, planning had begun in earnest several months earlier, in regular meetings with my political team as well as with Kamala and her husband, Doug, and her chief of staff, Lorraine Voles.

I felt I had a strong case to make. One that wasn't just about what I had done but about what I had plans to do.

I had already capped prescription drugs at $2,000 for seniors. I wanted to lower prescription drug costs for every American. I'd cut



9780316598484_PromiseMeAmerica_int_1P.indd 308 7/17/26 1:51 PM

child poverty and kept childcare centers from going under during the pandemic. I had a plan to make day care and childcare and elder care more affordable for families. I'd passed a corporate minimum tax to make big corporations finally begin to pay their fair share. I wanted to make billionaires finally do the same. I had passed legislation that was now pumping billions of dollars into new infrastructure — roads and bridges and public transit. I had passed legislation to reclaim America's primacy in science and technology. I wanted to guide those investments so that they would have the greatest and most widespread impact. I had plans to make our economy and tax code fairer, to pass long-held priorities like universal pre-K, to lower housing costs, and to push several of my efforts that had fallen just short of the finish line — like the Freedom to Vote Act, the John R. Lewis Voting Rights Advancement Act, the Protecting the Right to Organize (PRO) Act for workers, a full assault weapons ban, and the codification of *Roe v. Wade*.

I had expanded NATO, strengthened it, and made it more unified than ever. I had led the world to arm Ukraine and stand up against Putin. I was hoping to breathe life into the Middle East peace process.

Put simply, I wanted to finish the job.

Above all else, I wanted to preserve, defend, and protect our democracy. I felt I had done that in 2020, and I believed I was the best person to stand up for our democracy again.

It bears repeating that we'd just had a historically strong midterm election. For months, I had been told they were going to be a bloodbath, delivering huge losses for the Democrats. The history was daunting if you looked at the previous two Democratic presidencies. During the first midterm election of Bill Clinton's presidency, Democrats had lost 52 seats in the House and eight in the Senate. During the first midterm election of Barack Obama's presidency, Democrats lost 63 House seats and six Senate seats. During mine, we lost nine seats in the House and actually gained a seat in the United States Senate.

The economy continued its record-breaking pace, with over a million jobs created in the first quarter of 2023 and inflation dropping



9780316598484_PromiseMeAmerica_int_1P.indd 309 7/17/26 1:51 PM

dramatically. It had been cut nearly in half from its high point in June of 2022 and was on track to reaching the 2 percent target the Federal Reserve had set in place. (By the time I left office, it would be under 3 percent.)

Beyond that, I felt I had had two signature moments that met the tests for vigorous Presidential leadership at home and strong Presidential leadership in the world.

The first was my State of the Union address. When I'd given that speech two months earlier, I'd known that people were viewing it as a test of my ability to deliver a message, to show I had enough fight in me. Standing before Congress, I was able to announce twelve million jobs created over two years — more jobs than any president had ever created even in twice that amount of time. COVID deaths were down nearly 90 percent. Inflation was coming back down. I had signed over three hundred bills into law, and I wanted to keep up the momentum.

Throughout my remarks, Republicans had been violating decorum and yelling and interrupting. They booed when I pointed out, accurately, that "some of my Republican friends want to take the economy hostage unless I agree to their economic plans. All of you at home should know what those plans are. Instead of making the wealthy pay their fair share, some Republicans want Medicare and Social Security to sunset."

As the booing intensified, I decided to ad-lib. "Anybody who doubts it, contact my office. I'll give you a copy of the proposal."

More booing and jeering. Speaker McCarthy, seated behind me, had completely lost control of his caucus. That was okay; I continued, "I enjoy conversation." Lots of laughter.

But I had laid a trap, and now I sprang it. By booing my comments, the Republicans were saying that they didn't want to be accused of cutting Social Security and Medicare. "Folks, as we all apparently agree, Social Security and Medicare is off the books now, right? They're not to be touched." Members on both sides of the aisle cheered. "We've got unanimity!"[1]



9780316598484_PromiseMeAmerica_int_1P.indd 310 7/17/26 1:51 PM

I'm always happy to negotiate in private, but I had just secured a very public commitment.

That night and in the days that followed, I got universal, enthusiastic support from my fellow Democrats.[2] Chuck Schumer said, "Tonight, everyday Americans hearing this speech felt that President Biden was talking directly to them." He added, "President Biden talked with vision . . . with values . . . with vigor. The speech tonight was a great success." Nancy Pelosi said, "In tonight's State of the Union address, President Biden offered an inspiring message of progress, hope, and unity for our nation. Under the president's magnificent leadership, Democrats have made a tangible difference in the lives of America's families." House Minority Leader Hakeem Jeffries said, "President Biden delivered a compelling . . . vision to make life better for everyday Americans. And his dignity presented a stark contrast with the right-wing extremists who are unfit to serve."

The second signature moment was my secret trip into Kyiv two weeks later. It was a risky and strenuous journey that, occurring just before the one-year anniversary of the Russian invasion of Ukraine, delivered an iconic example of democracies standing together and a stark rebuke to Vladimir Putin.

I felt I had addressed concerns that I lacked the vigor to run for reelection. Still, I had not come to this decision lightly. Today there is no shortage of people who think I blindly raced to run again. Driven by ambition. Selfishness. Unaware of the concerns about my age. I knew better than anyone how old I was. I knew what I was — and wasn't — capable of doing. I carefully monitored how I was meeting the demands of the job. And there is not a single example of me failing to handle my responsibilities. I didn't need another four years behind the Resolute Desk. It was not as if Jill and I were enamored of living in the White House, though it was a great honor. I didn't need to have access to Camp David. The easiest thing for me to do would have been to say I wouldn't run again. It would have been far easier for me, and for my family. But I felt an obligation to run. I felt I



9780316598484_PromiseMeAmerica_int_1P.indd 311 7/17/26 1:51 PM

had set the country on the right path, and again: I wanted to finish the job. I believed my agenda — to end trickle-down economics, to make the wealthy pay their fair share, to invest in childcare and day care and elder care and education and the climate — was what the country needed. I believed the world order that the United States had led since the end of World War II was at risk — and I was determined not only to preserve it but to lead it. I believed our democracy was at stake. And I believed Donald Trump was a threat to the nation and I was the best person to beat him. People say I was deluding myself that I could do the job at my age. My answer to that is: I *was* doing the job.

And I thought that if given the choice between me, with a full picture of both my age and my accomplishments, and Donald Trump, with a full picture of his chaos and disregard for democracy, the choice was clear.

Beyond that, I thought I further benefited from comparison. I've always loved the saying, "Don't compare me to the Almighty, compare me to the alternative." I thought that voters would do that, certainly with Donald Trump, who was gaining steam and looking like the Republican nominee, and quite possibly with other Democrats who might be considering a run.

As it related to my fellow Democrats. Yes, I believed we had a strong bench of talented and ambitious people. But I did not believe any one of them was a stronger candidate than me, or had a better chance of winning in 2024. You can dismiss that assessment if you want. But I know the process I went through. I made a thoughtful, careful, rigorous judgment.

Moreover, I wasn't the only one who had to make a judgment. Any Democrat who felt I wasn't up to the job of being president, or was a weaker candidate for president, or was less likely to defeat Donald Trump, could have spoken out against me, come to see me, or called for another candidate — or run themselves in 2022 or 2023, or even in 2024. Robert Kennedy Jr. did. Then he withdrew from the race and



9780316598484_PromiseMeAmerica_int_1P.indd 312 7/17/26 1:51 PM

left the party. Congressman Dean Phillips did. He lost. I stopped no one from running for president.

The presidency is handed to no one. If you want it, you have to run. You have to earn it. I ran twice before I won. I had to defeat twenty Democrats to win the nomination in 2020. And then I had to beat an incumbent. Is it hard to run for president? Yes. Is it even harder to run against a sitting president? Yes. Anyone who was scared off from running has no business being president. Because while campaigning for president is hard, serving as president is a lot harder.

In considering a campaign, we also noted that we had a very strong supporter list, not just Democrats, or people who opposed Trump, but people who actively supported me — ready to be activated.

Still, I was acutely aware of the concerns around my age. I recognized that running for the nomination at the age of eighty would make me the oldest nominee ever — though just three and a half years older than Donald Trump. I believed the experience and the wisdom I had gained over fifty years in public life outweighed the obvious weaknesses of age — my thinner voice, my greater tendency to misstate places and names, my halting gait.

My gait, in particular, was the subject of one memorable conversation. In May 2022, I had invited Senator Romney and his family for a private tour of the White House. As we were walking, he pulled me aside and asked if he could offer some advice. "Pump your arms," he said. "Excuse me?" I responded. "You're holding your hands stiffly by your side when you walk. Pump your arms and you'll look more energetic and confident." It was good advice, and I tried to take it. More importantly, it was another example of the small acts of decency and kindness that we could stand to see a lot more of in our politics.

I believed my record as president was the best answer I had to all the questions about my age. But would telling the story of my achievements be enough to allay those concerns?

Throughout my presidency, I had held regular political gatherings in the Treaty Room of the White House. We had one scheduled for



9780316598484_PromiseMeAmerica_int_1P.indd 313 7/17/26 1:51 PM

April 18. The machinery was in motion for my announcement for a second term. We had set the date for April 25. Exactly four years to the day after I had announced for the 2020 election. We had a video and TV ads ready to go. And we were ready to make sure it was a great fundraising launch.

So I wanted to give anyone with doubts or concerns an opportunity to raise them. Arrayed around the room were Jen O'Malley Dillon, Mike Donilon, Anita Dunn, Bruce Reed, Steve Ricchetti, Annie Tomasini, Anthony Bernal, and Jill. Ron Klain, who had left his role as chief of staff and taken a private sector job a couple of months earlier, joined as well.

When I held political meetings in the Treaty Room, the team fell into a habit of taking the same seats every time: Ron on the couch closest to me, Jen on the opposite side of the couch, Mike in a chair off to the side. Jen would begin by laying out the agenda for the meeting, although the agenda for this meeting was clear. The announcement was one week off. It was the "speak now or forever hold your peace" moment.

I looked at the people who had helped me get this far. It was Jill who spoke first. She asked that everyone in the room be totally honest and give their unvarnished opinion, no spin.

Mike Donilon usually began these meetings with a polling update. He pointed out that my polling had remained remarkably consistent from the time I took office, although the withdrawal from Afghanistan was responsible for a significant drop from which I hadn't fully recovered. He painted the picture of a race that would be within the margin of error at the outset and likely stay that way.

We went around the room. Everyone offered their thoughts on the race. Everyone was in. There was no demurral or dissent. I was in.

The next week, during my regular lunch with the vice president, I asked Mike Donilon to join to discuss the campaign launch the next day. After walking us through the plan, Mike showed Kamala the two videos we'd prepared.



9780316598484_PromiseMeAmerica_int_1P.indd 314 7/17/26 1:51 PM

The first would serve as the formal announcement itself. The script I recorded at my home had now been overlaid with other video and music. It opened with powerful images of the January 6 insurrectionists storming the Capitol and ransacking the building. Then it showed me, and the first word I said was "Freedom." It was a deliberate choice. And one that I knew the vice president would welcome. We were anchoring our campaign on the themes of freedom and democracy.

Kamala responded favorably. She talked about how powerfully the freedom message was resonating in the events she was holding around the country. She believed that people heard it, rightly, as about more than a woman's right to choose, an issue she had been discussing regularly. It was also about a broader set of individual liberties and constitutional rights. By December, she would turn those early months of travel into a more formal "Freedom Tour" across the country. This message was directly in her wheelhouse. And she was really good at delivering it.

The second video was a TV spot that would be released shortly after the announcement video. It opened with images of the American flag and rooted our campaign in core American values. I've often thought that for too long we Democrats allowed Republicans to steal powerful images like the flag from us. I was determined not to let that happen in this campaign.

We spent the rest of our time discussing Kamala's thoughts on our next steps. When the lunch ended, I felt good about it. Kamala and Doug had been involved in the political planning up to this point, but seeing the rollout videos and going over the timeline brought an added sense of gravity. I wanted to reinforce for Kamala how critical her role would be in the reelection. Now, she could see it.

We announced the next day.

That afternoon, I went to speak to North America's Building Trades Union (NABTU). As I entered the hall, I was greeted with chants of "Four more years!" The union president, Sean McGarvey,



9780316598484_PromiseMeAmerica_int_1P.indd 315 7/17/26 1:51 PM

talked about the "life-changing" impact of my legislative accomplishments.[3] He would later say of my presidency that it was "almost like the perfect leader was sent at the perfect time for working people."[4]

As I said that day:

> We're creating jobs again. Manufacturing has come alive again. People can afford decent health care. Towns that had been forgotten and left behind for dead are coming alive again because of you all and what we're doing. Now we've just got to keep it going.[5]

I was ready to finish the job.

## BUDGETS AND BRINKSMANSHIP

While I was officially a candidate, the campaign wouldn't begin in earnest for several months, and the strongest argument I could make for reelection was by doing the job for the American people.

In May, I began meeting with Speaker Kevin McCarthy about the looming debt ceiling (the default deadline was estimated as early June), and I received my first taste of the lengths the new Republican House majority would go in order to derail our progress. This had become an all-too-common form of brinksmanship in the country. And frankly, the press and many in politics have grown numb to just how serious it is. The full faith and credit of the United States is one of the greatest assets our nation has. If we ever lose it, it will wreak havoc on the world's economy, and our own. But Reublicans kept testing the limits. One of these days, the game being played by the Republcians will go too far and we'll all pay the cost. I was determined that this would not happen while I was president.

Because many Republicans were willing to play with fire and endanger the recovering international economy to score a political victory, I believed an agreement would require my direct involvement.



9780316598484_PromiseMeAmerica_int_1P.indd 316 7/17/26 1:51 PM

As those negotiations continued, I traveled to a G7 meeting in Hiroshima. Upon my return, Speaker McCarthy and I were able to reach an agreement on the debt ceiling and spending levels for the next two fiscal years. It was a good deal: boosting spending for defense and veterans, holding most other funding stable, and, importantly, pushing a volatile political issue past the presidential election. In early June, I signed the deal.

The summer brought more international travel, with meetings in London and Helsiniki, a NATO summit in Vilnius, a G20 meeting in New Delhi, and an important meeting in Hanoi.

By September, we were once again facing a fiscal challenge — the government was running out of funding, and far-right House Republicans had been pushing for cuts that would take spending levels well below what Speaker McCarthy and I had agreed to during the debt limit talks.

The agreement I struck with Speaker McCarthy came on September 30, 2023, and it extended government funding for about forty-seven days. The right wing of the Republican caucus was incensed. I wouldn't give them the draconian cuts they wanted. Florida representative Matt Gaetz offered me some backhanded praise when he said, "It is going to be difficult for my Republican colleagues to keep calling President Biden feeble while he continues to take Speaker McCarthy's lunch money in every negotiation."[6]

On October 2, Gaetz filed a motion to vacate, and the next day the House removed McCarthy from the speakership. It was the first time in American history that a Speaker was removed from office in this way. For nearly a month, the United States House of Representatives was mired in mass confusion, bitter recriminations, and open revolt. It took nearly a month before they settled on McCarthy's replacement, Mike Johnson, who had barely any experience in Congressional leadership. Notably, the Republicans had no Speaker during the Hamas attacks of October 7 or during their immediate aftermath.



9780316598484_PromiseMeAmerica_int_1P.indd 317 7/17/26 1:51 PM

In November, with Mike Johson as speaker, the House passed a two-step government funding stopgap, extending some programs through January 19, 2024, and others through February 2, 2024. I signed the agreement on November 16.

Thus continued the dangerous fiscal brinksmanship of the Republican caucus. Keeping the government open, once a routine matter, had now become one of the most common challenges a president faces.

In the end, the Republicans would refuse to supply enough votes needed to keep the government open, even though they were the majority party. So I made sure the Democrats would. The Republicans were red-hot angry that I had once again negotiated a deal that didn't give in to their extreme demands.

At one point during these fights, Marjorie Taylor Greene compared me to FDR and LBJ for my ability to preserve the spending programs I cared the most about.[7] She meant it as a criticism. I was happy to take it as a compliment. I wouldn't turn to Representatives Greene or Gaetz as authorities on much of anything, but their assessments of what I accomplished in these negotiations made a pretty good argument for my effectiveness as president.

As 2023 came to a close, my political standing had solidified. Meanwhile, the Republicans seemed even more dysfunctional than usual heading into 2024—at war with themselves, being led by an untried speaker, and with their presumptive nominee Donald Trump in the throes of seemingly endless legal challenges. It was hard to keep them all straight; he was on trial in New York and Florida for a bewildering array of charges. He faced a felony conviction in a case involving falsifying business records to conceal a hush-money payment, and he was ordered to pay more than $80 million for defaming E. Jean Carroll in a sexual assault case. He also faced additional criminal indictments for civil fraud in New York for trying to tamper with the election results in Georgia, and for a series of crimes related to January 6.



9780316598484_PromiseMeAmerica_int_1P.indd 318 7/17/26 1:51 PM

## VALLEY FORGE

As much as I had been consumed with battles over government funding, the stakes of the election were more existential than that. As we rolled into the election year, I wanted to find opportunities to speak directly about our democracy, and the threats to it. That is what I did several months later, on January 5, 2024, when I went to Valley Forge, Pennsylvania. If you've never been to Valley Forge, it's one of the most inspiring Revolutionary War sites in the country. Not because a big victory was achieved there but because George Washington simply refused to give up. During the brutal winter of 1777, he lost nearly two thousand men to disease, malnutrition, and the cold. But he never surrendered, and survived to win the battles of 1778 that would persuade the French that Americans were worthy allies. That we deserved a fighting chance.

Washington knew something the British didn't. His ragtag army wasn't fighting for treasure. Or crown. Or empire. There was something more powerful animating their mission. Washington's troops were fighting for the right to govern themselves. For democracy. He described their mission at Valley Forge as a "sacred cause."[8]

I thought that a "sacred cause" was a perfect description of what the nation was fighting for in 2024. As we arrived in Valley Forge, I thought about all the times I had been there before. I'd first come as a Boy Scout many years ago. I had been back several times as a US senator and private citizen. This time, I was visiting almost three years to the day that insurrectionists had stormed the US Capitol. I made it a point each year to remind the nation what happened that day.

On the first anniversary, my message was simple: We can never let the truth of what happened on January 6 be rewritten. I've said it many times. Great nations don't bury the truth. They face it. The good, the bad, and the ugly.

And we know the truth. Donald Trump led an insurrection. His goal was to remain in power after the American people had voted him



9780316598484_PromiseMeAmerica_int_1P.indd 319 7/17/26 1:51 PM

out of office. That's the truth. It was a violent assault. The rioters weren't "peaceful protesters." They came armed to stop the official certification of a legitimate election. The criminals who attacked law enforcement officers that day didn't deserve pardons. They deserved jail terms.

What Donald Trump did on January 6, 2021, should never be forgotten. It should follow him to his grave.

On the second anniversary of January 6, in 2023, I hosted an event at the White House to honor the law enforcement officers beaten and brutalized that day. From my perspective, those courageous officers saved our democracy. There were over 140 cops injured on January 6.[9] One officer died afterward. Four more would take their own lives in the months that followed because of what they had been through. When they testified about what had happened, officers described the assaults that took place that day as medieval. One said that nothing in his experience in the army or in law enforcement had prepared him for what he confronted on January 6.[10] To this day, Donald Trump and his supporters continue to preen and posture like they're supporters of law enforcement.

Here's my view: You don't get to turn a blind eye to cops being punched, speared, sprayed, and brutalized and call yourself a friend of law enforcement.

I can't stomach what happened to these brave Capitol Hill law enforcement officers. It sickens me. It did then. It still does. And frankly, it amazes me that more people in the country don't seem to share my view.

---

Now, it was 2024. Just one day before the third anniversary. I thought Valley Forge was the perfect place to underline not only why January 6 mattered so much — but what was at stake in the 2024 election.

The threat posed to the nation wasn't just about what Donald Trump had done. It was about what he planned to do, including a



9780316598484_PromiseMeAmerica_int_1P.indd 320 7/17/26 1:51 PM

full-scale campaign of revenge. He said he'd be a dictator on day one. He was planning to invoke the Insurrection Act, which would allow him to deploy troops on the streets of America. He was calling those who opposed him "vermin." He talked about the "blood" of America as being "poisoned," echoing the language used in Nazi Germany.[11]

Donald Trump had kicked off his campaign on March 25, 2023, in Waco, Texas — around the thirtieth anniversary of the 1993 Waco standoff between the Branch Davidians and the federal government.

He began his rally with a giant video of violent scenes from January 6. He played a version of our national anthem performed by the J6 Prison Choir, a choir of men imprisoned for their involvement in the attack. He called his campaign his "final battle."[12] He said it was about "retribution." He didn't communicate with his supporters using dog whistles; he used train whistles. By going to Valley Forge, I wanted to emphasize the contrast. To make it clear that January 6 was to be condemned, not celebrated. To make it clear that my campaign was about the American people and that Trump's campaign was about him. To make it clear that the stakes in the 2024 election were nothing less than the survival of our very democracy.

My record proved what we could do. I had inherited a nation facing crisis after crisis — a once-in-a-century pandemic, the worst economy since the Great Depression, an overdue reckoning on racial justice, a global climate crisis, and the biggest threat to our democracy since the Civil War. I felt we had made real progress on every front.

I will always be proud to say I led this country through COVID. We reopened the nation. People went back to work. We resumed normal life. But the toll was high. Over a million Americans died in the pandemic. And yet one of the things I'm proudest of is the studies done after the pandemic that said the steps I had taken — especially getting 230 million Americans vaccinated — helped to save as many as three million lives. What I had done was consequential. I knew how hard it had been. The most important test of a president is to lead in a crisis — and that's what I had done.



9780316598484_PromiseMeAmerica_int_1P.indd 321 7/17/26 1:51 PM

We went from an economy in crisis to the strongest economy in the world. The nation created over sixteen million jobs during my presidency. More jobs than had ever been created before in a four-year period. Unemployment dropped to a fifty-year low — and stayed low. More small businesses had been created during my administration than during any four-year period in history. *The Wall Street Journal* — no friend of Democrats — called our economy "the envy of the world."[13] I know the country didn't always feel it. Despite the fact that inflation was coming down and I was actively working to lower costs on everything from prescriptions to groceries to broadband, high costs were causing stress for American families. I also understood that people didn't want to talk about COVID anymore. Paradoxically, our recovery, so desperately needed in 2021, made the pandemic an unpopular topic in 2024.

But I didn't want to shy away from my accomplishments. That's what campaigns are for: to tell the voters about what you've done. To make the case for why it matters. And why it's important to keep it going. I knew my economic record was historic even if the voters weren't there yet. I felt it was an economic record to run on — not run from.

## MOTHER EMANUEL

Three days after my speech at Valley Forge, on January 8, 2024, I was back at Mother Emanuel Church in Charleston, South Carolina.

Mother Emanuel is a historic, storied church that holds a special place in the Black community. If you have ever been inside its walls, you know it has the power to humble you, to inspire you, to lift you up. I thought the message I was bringing that day would carry special resonance.

I wanted to speak about the rising poison of white supremacy in the nation and the need for all of us to stand against it. This was no imagined issue in this church. Just nine years before, a stranger had



9780316598484_PromiseMeAmerica_int_1P.indd 322 7/17/26 1:51 PM

passed through the doors of Mother Emanuel. He was invited in to pray by its members. That stranger was a white supremacist who would gun down nine churchgoers.

This was the church where I attended services alongside the congregation in 2015, hoping to ease their pain. Only to have them ease the pain I was feeling from the loss of my son Beau to cancer a month before. It was where this remarkable congregation showed one of the greatest acts of faith I have ever seen by forgiving the killer who gunned down their fellow churchgoers.

As I began my remarks, protesters rose in the church, saying, " If you really care about the lives lost here, then you should honor the lives lost and call for a cease-fire in Palestine." There were audible gasps. The congregation began to murmur angrily. I sought to defuse the situation by saying, "That's all right." The protesters continued with their shouts of "Cease-fire now." After a few minutes, security began to remove them from the church. As they did, I said: "Look, folks, I understand their passion. And I've been quietly working with the Israeli government to get them to reduce and significantly get out of Gaza…" I would face protests like this everywhere I went in 2024. I did understand the protesters. I listened, and I heard them. The bloodshed in Gaza was ripping me apart too. I never stopped working on the issue. Right up until the moment I left office. In fact, the very last thing I did as president was deliver a cease-fire and a return of hostages from Gaza. I got it done on the last weekend I was president.

I had come to Mother Emanuel, though, not only to talk about the need to stand against the rising tide of white supremacy but also to talk about another rising danger in the country. I said that just as after the Civil War, Southerners had sought to perpetuate the myth of the "lost cause," a false claim about the war's causes, after the 2020 election we were living in an era of what I called the "second lost cause."

We were living in a time when lies were burying the truth. And that had enormous consequences for our nation. Donald Trump was



9780316598484_PromiseMeAmerica_int_1P.indd 323 7/17/26 1:51 PM

running on the lie that the 2020 election had been stolen. Lies like this are not innocuous.

At Mother Emanuel, I made the case that the lost cause told the lie that the Civil War had been fought over states' rights, not slavery. That Southern soldiers had nobly fought to defend their homes from a tyrannical federal government determined to strip away their liberty.

The consequence of that lie? A Civil War fought over slavery in the 1860s would still be reverberating throughout the nation well into the 1960s and beyond. There was nothing romantic about the lies of the lost cause. The destruction of Reconstruction. The rise of the KKK. The lynching of Emmett Till. Bull Connor's snarling dogs. John Lewis's bloodied head on the Edmund Pettus Bridge. The assassination of Martin Luther King Jr. The killing of Eric Garner, George Floyd, and far too many others. Racism was America's original sin.

Now, Donald Trump was perpetuating the second lost cause. This time, instead of states' rights, the big lie was about an election falsely claimed to be stolen but demonstrably not so. Just as our nation had paid a terrible price for the rise of the lost cause after the Civil War, we would pay a terrible price for the rise of the second lost cause after the 2020 election if we allowed it to fester and grow. The lie of the lost cause has continued to poison our path to true racial equality. The lie of the second lost cause will poison our democracy until it is stamped out. It will instill doubt in our elections, when we need to have confidence in them. It will undermine the legitimacy of solving our differences peacefully at the ballot box instead of at the end of a rifle. It will replace faith in the rule of law with the belief that might makes right. I finished my speech that day by saying it was a "time for choosing." That what was in front of us was a choice of whether we would be a nation that embraced the big lie of a stolen election in 2020, or a nation that embraced the truth.[14]

I left Charleston feeling good. The reaction had been strong and enthusiastic. Predictably, the press coverage would be about the



9780316598484_PromiseMeAmerica_int_1P.indd 324 7/17/26 1:51 PM

protest in the church. But I felt I had laid down an important marker for the 2024 election: The defense of democracy was going to be at the center of this fight.

## PRIMARY SEASON

When I led the effort to rewrite the Democratic primary calendar, I knew I had set myself up for potential embarrassment. New Hampshire had refused to move its primary, and the DNC threatened not to seat New Hampshire's delegates. As the sitting president, I was honor bound not to endorse New Hampshire's behavior, which meant that I couldn't campaign or even appear on the ballot there.

Not every candidate felt so constrained. Dean Phillips was campaigning hard, as a scrappy underdog. It's a strategy New Hampshire has rewarded before. And he was doing it with money. Phillips and his super PAC would spend millions of dollars on negative TV ads attacking me in New Hampshire. His criticism? I was too old to be president.[15]

My age wasn't a state secret; it was the argument Democratic voters were hearing regularly.

There was another argument that was percolating: that I had reengineered the primary schedule to my own advantage. If that were what I was worried about, it would have made more sense to keep South Carolina where it was. That way, if I got knocked down in New Hampshire, South Carolina could come to my rescue, as it had once before. But that's not what I did. I moved it up.

Now it was January 23, 2024, and New Hampshire voters were going to the polls. Behind the scenes, the press and the pundits were salivating at the thought of my falling on my face in New Hampshire. They were certain I was a weak candidate. They were certain I was too old. They were certain Gaza was going to sink me. They were certain inflation was going to kill me. They were certain Democrats wanted someone new. And they couldn't wait to write it. They knew



9780316598484_PromiseMeAmerica_int_1P.indd 325 7/17/26 1:51 PM

it was coming. After all, I wasn't even on the ballot; there would be a winner to write about.

It turned out, to their surprise and even a little bit to mine, that I got 64 percent of the vote. *As a write-in candidate*. That never happens. I was supposed to be LBJ. Run out of the race by New Hampshire. Instead I received a resounding vote of confidence. Meanwhile, Donald Trump got 54 percent of the vote in the Republican primary, where he was on the ballot.

Three days later, I would go on to win the Nevada primary with 89 percent of the vote. Three weeks later, I won Michigan with 81 percent of the vote. A week after that, I swept Super Tuesday. Then, on March 12, I wrapped up the nomination in Georgia with 95 percent of the vote.

In all, from February 3 until June 8, the Democratic Party held over fifty primaries and caucuses. I got over fourteen million votes. Eighty-seven percent of all the votes cast. And 3,905 delegates. I needed 1,968 to be the party's nominee.[16]

Come June, folks would say it didn't mean anything because no one serious had run against me. No one said that about Clinton in 1996 or Obama in 2012, both of whom decided to run when the polls showed them trailing the Republican they would face in the general election. People would say I hadn't really been challenged. The truth is, even that was a sign of strength. I had it on good authority that several big names in Democratic politics looked at running. They held meetings and took polls and talked to donors and to potential staff. If they thought I was weak or vulnerable, they would have taken their shot. But they didn't.

So the press and pundits kept talking about how weak I was. But every purportedly serious candidate decided not to run against me because I was too strong.

The primaries sent no warning signs that I was in trouble. But that couldn't derail the narrative setting in on my candidacy. That I was too old. That I was declining mentally.



9780316598484_PromiseMeAmerica_int_1P.indd 326 7/17/26 1:51 PM

In fact, when my communications team met with *The New York Times* in the 2020 race to talk about their coverage of me, they were told in no uncertain terms that the paper had decided I was too old. First, they dismissed me as having an agenda that "tinkers at the edges." Then they got to the real point about why they weren't for me: "What's more, Mr. Biden is seventy-seven."[17]

In 2020, the voters would disagree. I beat Donald Trump by seven million votes. I won 306 electoral college votes and a majority of the popular vote — 51 percent. I flipped five states from red to blue.

Now it was four years later, and the noise about my age had grown louder. Yes, people could point to moments when I mixed up names or lost my train of thought or had a weak voice or walked slowly. But they could never point to something presidential that I failed to do. I led the country out of COVID. I led the strongest economic recovery in the world. I passed historic legislation. I stood up to Putin in Ukraine, and I expanded NATO. I handled every natural disaster that occurred on my watch. The entire rationale for the fixation on my age was the belief that one day I would be faced with a crisis or a threat to the nation or a decision that had to be made and I wouldn't be able to handle it. But it simply never happened.

## THE HUR REPORT

I believed my record as president was the best answer I had to all the questions about my age.What had been a long-simmering problem for me would explode on February 8, when Special Counsel Robert Hur, who was investigating my handling of classified materials for the Justice Department, released his report. His conclusion? No criminal charges were warranted.

Within minutes of the release of his report, it became clear that no one would care that the issue Hur had been investigating was resolved in my favor. The only thing anyone would care about was some extraneous commentary that Hur chose to include.



9780316598484_PromiseMeAmerica_int_1P.indd 327 7/17/26 1:51 PM

In his report, Hur wrote that I was an "elderly man with a poor memory."[18]

If the Trump campaign had written the report itself, they couldn't have come up with a line better designed to inflict maximum political damage.

I decided that I needed to hold a press conference to address the issue. In hindsight, it was a mistake. I was angry — and it showed. What made me especially angry wasn't Hur's gratuitous hit on my age and memory. It was his assertion that I didn't know when my son Beau died. It hurts as much today as it did on May 30, 2015. So if Robert Hur wants to know when my son died, here's my answer: Today. I wake up every day feeling like I just lost him a minute ago.

Being president requires a remarkable amount of gear shifting every day — from negotiating with foreign leaders to pursuing domestic policy, from visiting a disaster site to rubbing elbows with fundraisers. Hur's commentary was especially outrageous when you think about the context of the interview that he based it on. I sat down for over five hours with Hur and his people across October 8 and 9 of 2023. It was the day after October 7. The day Hamas attacked Israel. A world crisis. I had been up all night dealing with the aftershocks of a profound change to the global order. Go ask the Israeli leadership if they thought they were dealing with a diminished president that day. Go watch the address I gave to the nation that day and ask yourself if I was old and enfeebled. Or watch the trip I took to Israel eleven days later.

I had proactively taken the step of voluntarily informing the Department of Justice that I was unknowingly in possession of these documents as soon as my lawyers found them at my former office at the University of Pennsylvania's Penn Biden Center.

So there I was, fully cooperating with the special prosecutor's office, devoting time to their questions on a weekend when I was handling one of the biggest crises in the world.

But even if the pundits were in an uproar over the Hur report, Democratic voters shrugged it off. Roughly two weeks after the release

of the Hur report, Michigan Democrats went to the polls. Even before the Hur report, Michigan, with its substantial Arab American population, was the place where I was supposedly going to be embarrassed by a big protest vote against me over Gaza. But it didn't materialize. I got 81 percent of the vote.

---

As the first quarter of 2024 came to a close, job creation had been extraordinary — 353,000 jobs in January, 270,000 jobs in February, 315,000 jobs in March. Nearly one million jobs in just three months.

Inflation was still too high, as were costs for families — and those two were often linked in the public mind. But inflation had fallen into the mid–3 percent level and was on track to sink to close to 2 percent by the fall.

Of course, telling people that we've succeeded in getting prices to grow more slowly isn't the same as saying that we brought your old prices back. Which is why we had embarked on an ambitious agenda to actually lower costs for people.

One of the largest successes in that effort was part of the Inflation Reduction Act, which capped out-of-pocket costs for several drugs and provided an overall cap of $2,000 on out-of-pocket drug costs for Medicare beneficiaries. It also gave Medicare the power to negotiate better prices for many popular and expensive drugs. We capped insulin costs at thirty-five dollars a month for Medicare beneficiaries. And we achieved substantial savings on drugs that treat everything from diabetes to arthritis to heart failure. This was a historic success, a long-sought-after goal for progressives, and it saved Americans billions of dollars. It was my flubbed description of this accomplishment that would be one of the lowest moments for me in the presidential debate that would come.

We undertook other efforts to ease consumer pain. Much of this work fell under the category of fighting "junk fees" — those hidden,



9780316598484_PromiseMeAmerica_int_1P.indd 329 7/17/26 1:51 PM

additional, mandatory, maddening charges that show up on so many bills: hotel fees, baggage fees, ticket fees.

We put in place a rule to cap most credit card late fees at eight dollars, a significant reduction from the previous typical thirty-two-dollar fee.

Under the infrastructure law, we were able to provide a subsidy that made broadband free for millions of households.

I also targeted one of the drivers of grocery costs for Americans: the fact that just four major corporations controlled over 80 percent of the beef market. Secretary Vilsack worked creatively to increase competition, allocating more than $1 billion in American Rescue Plan funds to build, expand, and support independent and midsize meat- and poultry-processing plants. The goal was to lower costs by increasing competition. The full benefits of this work, like so many of our investments, will be felt over time. However, I recognized that was cold comfort to families struggling with costs.

As we moved into April, I was deeply engaged in a battle to get $60 billion in funding for Ukraine. I couldn't believe that after all we had done to stand with Ukraine, so many Republicans were intent on walking away.

Under my leadership, America and the world had prevented Vladimir Putin from getting what he wanted. Putin thought he would invade Ukraine and be in Kyiv in three days. Three years later, when I left the presidency, he still had not taken Kyiv, or the country. In fact, I was the one who had stood in the center of Kyiv. Not him. On April 24, I secured the billions in funding Ukraine so desperately needed.[19]

As we moved deeper into the second quarter of 2024, foreign policy was taking up more and more of my time. It had already been a focus, especially with the wars in Ukraine and Gaza, but it would become even more so as I worked around the clock to convince Congress not to cut off funding for Ukraine, and to achieve a cease-fire and a return of the hostages in Gaza.



9780316598484_PromiseMeAmerica_int_1P.indd 330 7/17/26 1:51 PM

In the spring of 2024, the toll of civilian casualties in Gaza was rising quickly, as tallied by the media and international aid organizations. This created a challenge. I was committed to doing all that we could do, within ethical guidelines, to support our ally, Israel. But to turn a blind eye to these civilian casualties would be to abandon well-known rules of military engagement — which, even if we were not the aggressor, we had a responsibility to uphold, through our close military partnership with Israel. Many nations were increasingly critical of the war and were expressing these thoughts in the UN and in other international forums.

I had been calling on Israel to take precautions to reduce civilian suffering since the beginning of the conflict. It was obviously going to be difficult, given that so much close fighting was taking place in densely populated areas, and the fact that those responsible for the October 7 savagery deliberately hid in and under apartment buildings, schools, hospitals, and mosques, using Gaza's people as human shields. But that did not remove Israel's moral or legal responsibility to minimize harm to civilians. I had expressed these concerns privately in many conversations with Bibi, who acknowledged the damage that these rising casualties were doing to Israel's image, and to US support for the war.

But a familiar pattern established itself: He would promise to do more, and then another aggressive action would follow, killing more civilians. When we called them on it, the Israelis always had an explanation or excuse, but the result was the same. There were many heated conversations that spring. At one point, I warned Bibi that the extremists in his cabinet were out of control. I said, "Bibi, you promised me your hands were on the steering wheel." When he replied that they were, I said, "Well, you're driving into a ditch!"

This created a real dilemma for me, and I decided to act. In May 2024, on the eve of a major invasion of the southern Gaza city of Rafah by Israeli forces, I paused shipments of our heaviest munitions to Israel. The outcry was swift, from both Israel's defenders



9780316598484_PromiseMeAmerica_int_1P.indd 331 7/17/26 1:51 PM

and those who were critical of all we were doing to support Israel in other ways. There was very little middle ground at a time when the conflict was creating difficult political fault lines in the United States and around the world. But this decision, so indicative of the pressures of the presidency, was in keeping with my belief that complex and heart-wrenching challenges often require nuanced—and, to many, unsatisfactory—solutions.

## IMMIGRATION

America has always had a fraught history with immigration. As much as I love the Statue of Liberty and its promise of welcome, it was dedicated in 1886, just four years after Congress passed the Chinese Exclusion Act.

There is something about immigration that taps into a nation's deepest-held fears and prejudices. Yes—it's about securing the border. But if we're honest, it's about a lot more than that. It's about fear. And insecurity. And resentment. And demonization. It's about singling out the "other" to blame them for all our ills.

Throughout the campaign I was attacked for being soft on the issue. For embracing an open-border policy. Frankly, it was all a lot of malarkey. That doesn't mean it wasn't politically effective. It just means it wasn't true. Here are the facts:

Far from an open-border policy, I kept in place the cornerstone of the Trump border and immigration policy for most of my presidency. That was Title 42, an emergency policy linked to COVID, which allowed for the immediate removal of people from the country. I have always believed in strong enforcement of our immigration laws, even when many in my own party attacked me for it. In fact, I deported substantially more people during my time as president than Donald Trump did in his first term. You didn't hear about it because it wasn't done cruelly, or recklessly. The deportations targeted lawbreakers. Donald Trump's attacks on me were especially ironic since in the first



9780316598484_PromiseMeAmerica_int_1P.indd 332 7/17/26 1:51 PM

half of January 2025, Border Patrol encounters with undocumented migrants were nearly 50 percent lower than at the same point in January 2021; more people were coming into the country illegally on the last day of Trump's first term as president than on my last day.[20]

Donald Trump would say that crime was out of control under my administration. The truth is that violent crime and murders dropped dramatically under my presidency. In fact, the biggest surge in murders ever recorded in this country took place under Donald Trump.[21]

President Trump asserted that "illegals" were stealing jobs from Americans when I was president. The truth is we were creating so many jobs when I was president that on average, something like six to ten million jobs every month were going unfilled, even going as high as twelve million at one point.[22] Immigrants weren't taking American jobs. We couldn't find enough people in the country to fill all the jobs we had. The real difference came down to this: He wanted to create an issue. I wanted to solve the problem.

That's why for two years, I negotiated with Republicans in Congress to develop a real answer to our multifaceted immigration and border challenges; one that balanced America's security, humanitarian obligations, and labor market needs while addressing the surges of migrants to our southern border, backlogs in processing immigrants, and the status of millions of undocumented residents.

Indeed, in February 2024, I reached a bipartisan agreement on the toughest, most effective immigration and border bill ever put together.[23] On the other side of the deal was James Lankford, the Republican senator from Oklahoma. Senator Lankford was one of the most conservative members of the Senate.

For me, the most important provisions of the agreement had to do with significantly increasing the numbers of border agents and screening machines and asylum judges. This would allow us to better secure the border and to resolve asylum claims faster. The Republicans wanted all entries into the United States to come at legal points of entry. I agreed to that. And they wanted a trigger to effectively shut



9780316598484_PromiseMeAmerica_int_1P.indd 333 7/17/26 1:51 PM

down the border when it was overwhelmed. I agreed to that too. We put in place a trigger that said that if more than four thousand people a week were trying to gain entry, we would shut down the border until the number fell. The Democrats hated both of the Republican provisions I had agreed to, but I convinced them to support the bill.

A meaningful solution was coming into view.

Then Donald Trump got wind of what we were doing and began lobbying against it, in public and in private.

Why? Because the plan would work. And he couldn't allow that. He needed an issue. So, after two years of bipartisan negotiation, the Republicans broke their word and killed the bill. It was one of the most cynical things I've ever witnessed.

So I acted on my own. I put in place the trigger to control the border.[24] The results were immediate and dramatic. The number of people illegally trying to get into the country would drop into the five-hundred-per-day range. I would be attacked for doing too little, too late. Perhaps I had put too much time and faith in the legislative process, in the hopes of solving a problem that had plagued so many presidents. But over the next six months, we got immigration and the border under control.

I have always believed that America is a nation of immigrants and that immigration is one of the reasons we are the greatest nation on earth. We are going to regret this demonization of immigrants. It's going to lead to higher inflation, lower economic growth, fewer talented, smart people coming into America, and — worst of all — it's going to corrode our soul. We can't treat people this way and not have it rip at the fabric of our nation. I will always defend what I did as president. I think it was right to see immigration as a plus for this nation. Not as a threat. I think it was right to hold on to the core values of how we treat people in this nation. Not run roughshod over them. I think I was right to work for a real, bipartisan answer to the problem. Not just play politics with it.



9780316598484_PromiseMeAmerica_int_1P.indd 334 7/17/26 1:51 PM

When I left office, the border was secure, our economy was growing, and crime was down. When I left office, US Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) agents didn't wear face masks, immigrants weren't being packed into overcrowded, chaotic detention camps, and Americans weren't being killed in the streets. When I left office, America was standing up for its values, not shredding them.

## D-DAY AND THE DEBATE

In early June, I began an extensive period of travel across the country and around the world. First, I headed to Normandy to celebrate the eightieth anniversary of D-Day. Normandy is a special place. What always stands out to me is the silence. You see rows and rows of graves. All aligned in perfect order. Each grave marker kept meticulously clean. It's a place of remarkable peace.

If you ever get a chance to visit, go. Go so you can see the incredible bravery of Americans who came before you. Go so you can see the cost of freedom. Go so you can be reminded what this nation stands for.

The most powerful moment for me was meeting the roughly two hundred American veterans from D-Day still alive. All in their nineties or older. Many of them in wheelchairs. And yet nearly every one of them stood up to greet me, even as I insisted they not worry about it.

I wanted my words that day to be a reminder to America and the world about how much sacrifice had been made in defense of democracy and how it was now our obligation to do our part. Eisenhower's men at Normandy knew what Washington's men knew at Valley Forge: Democracy is a sacred cause.[25]

I then came home for a few days but soon crossed the Atlantic again to attend a two-day G7 summit in Italy. From there I flew overnight back to Joint Base Andrews, stayed on the plane as it refueled, and kept going, heading to a fundraiser that night in Los Angeles.



9780316598484_PromiseMeAmerica_int_1P.indd 335 7/17/26 1:51 PM

Then I went to Camp David to begin preparation for the upcoming debate with Donald Trump. It would be the earliest televised general election debate ever, the first in history to take place before either party had even held its convention.

There was discussion among my team about the timing of the debate. I had a different question: Why debate Donald Trump at all? After I'd bested him twice in 2020, it's not that I was concerned about my ability to debate Donald Trump. It was that he was so prone to lying with abandon, bullying the moderators, violating the rules, whining about even a hint of fact checking, that I didn't know whether there would be any value in my giving a public platform to this behavior. And it's not that it would be a miserable experience for me (though it surely would be); I felt his performances were miserable for democracy. Ultimately, we decided on an early debate, knowing that it would provide us more time to either mitigate or potentially amplify anything Donald Trump might do onstage. I had participated in high-pressure national debates for years and had acquitted myself well. In 2012, my debate with Paul Ryan took on a special urgency after Barack had a terrible first debate against Mitt Romney. We needed to stop the bleeding. Which I did. Barack called me that night before I took off on Air Force Two to say, "Thanks, you saved me."

What happened to Barack was not unique. Presidents seeking reelection often have terrible first debates that create media firestorms. Ronald Reagan looked lost and confused against Walter Mondale, which is why his quip at their next debate that he wouldn't answer questions about his age because he didn't want to exploit his opponent's "youth and inexperience" was so effective. George W. Bush was caught with a scowling face. Barack looked like he didn't care if he won or lost. There's a reason most incumbent presidents have a bad first debate: They're more focused on the country's and the world's problems than on campaigning. Running the country is the most demanding job in the world — and running for reelection means a second job on top of that.



9780316598484_PromiseMeAmerica_int_1P.indd 336 7/17/26 1:51 PM

While my opponent spent June rehearsing his shtick on the campaign trail, I spent the weeks before the June debate doing my job as president and commander in chief — issuing an executive order that cut illegal border crossings to new lows, setting forth a cease-fire plan to end the war between Israel and Hamas, and convincing our allies to use frozen Russian assets to fund Ukraine's defense.

The difference in 2024 was not that I had a bad debate. Lots of presidents had bad debates. The difference was that every other president was given the chance to redeem themselves in a second debate. As it turned out, that chance would not be available to me.

I spent roughly five days at Camp David preparing for the debate. The setting, the routine, the process were all familiar.

A mock debate stage was set up to mimic the debate stage I would see in Atlanta. There were multiple sessions scheduled for each day, some focused on substance, some on refining answers, some on performance. I spent hours in Aspen Lodge, the presidential cabin, going through thick briefing books and editing my answers on note cards. In many ways, this debate prep was no different from any other I had undertaken over the years. Except for one thing. I felt awful — so bad I was tested for COVID. The test came back negative. But I would leave debate camp as sick and tired as when I had arrived.

While my heavy travel schedule was a big reason I was so run-down, something else was weighing on me. On June 11, my son Hunter had been convicted of three felonies in a federal courtroom in Wilmington, Delaware. And it was breaking my heart. Even more than that, I lived daily with the fear — and the guilt — that it was going to break Hunter.

For years, Hunter had battled addiction. It had spiraled out of control after his brother Beau died in 2015. Since then, he'd fought back and beaten it. I could not have been prouder of him.

He achieved this recovery even in the face of six years of federal investigations. The primary focus of the investigations had been Hunter's failure to pay taxes for a few years while he was in the grip of



9780316598484_PromiseMeAmerica_int_1P.indd 337 7/17/26 1:51 PM

addiction. Normally, these investigations would be concluded when any overdue taxes were paid in full, with penalties. Hunter did that. But it didn't end the matter in his case. In fact, things got worse. Would anyone have been put through what Hunter endured if they weren't my son? Almost definitely not.

A year before, in June 2023, Hunter and the Department of Justice had reached a plea agreement. It seemed like the long-running nightmare was over. Hunter was prepared to plead guilty to two misdemeanors for failing to pay his taxes on time.

One other issue that had come up was that Hunter had failed to admit his drug addiction on a form he filled out to buy a gun. Hunter owned the gun for barely a week. It was never used in the commission of a crime. People who had done the same thing Hunter did almost never faced criminal prosecution. So, consistent with how it usually handles such matters, the government agreed that Hunter wouldn't be prosecuted on the gun charge. For any other citizen, that would have been the end of it. But the Republicans in Congress started to bring enormous pressure, and a judge in Delaware put the plea deal on hold. Then, the attorney general appointed a special prosecutor to Hunter's case. Then the Justice Department withdrew the plea deal they had agreed to.

The special prosecutor said he intended to bring charges against Hunter related to the purchase and possession of the gun. Then on June 11, 2024, Hunter was found guilty of three felonies on the gun charges. He could have been facing up to twenty-five years in prison. The special prosecutor made it clear he intended to seek the maximum sentence possible. The same Justice Department officials who had negotiated an agreement with Hunter to seek no felony charges were now looking to put him in jail for up to twenty-five years. To layer on one more bitter irony, that day I was scheduled to speak to a gathering of Everytown for Gun Safety, a wonderful organization working to combat gun violence. I did go to the event, and I spoke. But I'll always be grateful for Kamala's call that day, offering to go in my stead.



9780316598484_PromiseMeAmerica_int_1P.indd 338 7/17/26 1:51 PM

Throughout all of this, I never once spoke to the attorney general or to anyone in the justice system. I made a promise to stay out of it completely — and I honored it. But that didn't mean I couldn't see what was going on.

It was obvious. Hunter was being raked over the coals because of me. I knew the Republicans were using Hunter to hurt me. But my bigger concern was that they were determined to keep piling on the pressure until they broke him. Frankly, when I look back on it now, I don't know how he stood up to it. In the end, they failed to break Hunter. But I would be lying if I didn't admit that they took a piece out of me.

We landed in Atlanta a few hours before the debate. I did a quick run-through at the CNN studio where it would be held, then went back to the hotel for dinner and a final prep. We got in the motorcade around 8:30 p.m. and arrived at the studio just a few minutes before 9 p.m., when the debate was scheduled to begin.

It didn't feel right from the start.

One moment was particularly damaging. As I was finishing an answer on the deficit, I lost my train of thought, saw that my time was running out on the clock, and rushed the final part of my answer by blurting out: "We finally beat Medicare." What I meant to say was "We finally beat Big Pharma." This had been a huge accomplishment in my administration. As part of the Inflation Reduction Act, we had secured for Medicare the power to negotiate for lower drug prices. This was a historic achievement that would make life much more affordable for millions. Ironically, this historic achievement wouldn't lift my candidacy. It would help to sink it. What should have been a highlight of the debate became Exhibit A that I was too old to do the job.

For the next hour, I was reminded what it was like to be onstage with Donald Trump. The refusal to answer questions. The rapid-fire cascade of lies (including his claim that every one of the millions of jobs I had created had gone to an illegal immigrant). The refusal



9780316598484_PromiseMeAmerica_int_1P.indd 339 7/17/26 1:51 PM

to accept responsibility for anything, except for when he took credit for the *Dobbs* decision. The inconceivabilty that I was debating a convicted felon in the first place. My best answer of the night was also my bluntest one. I said Donald Trump had the "morals of an alley cat."

While I knew I was having a terrible night, I thought Trump's defiantly untruthful answers about his responsbility for January 6, and his refusal to say he would accept the results of the upcoming election, were disqualifying. The possibility that in 2025 he would subject the country to what he had put it through in January 2021 seemed to me too much for Americans to accept. Yet none of what he said would generate any impression that lasted past debate night. It would be my answers and my performance that would dominate the press coverage and political conversation in the weeks ahead.

When the debate was over and the lights came up, Donald Trump and I didn't shake hands. I turned to move offstage. Jill came up to give me a hug.

I knew the debate had gone badly. But I knew that debates had gone badly for lots of incumbent presidents. Especially their first ones. I left the stage thinking I would be debating Trump once more before the election was over.

I was wrong. This wasn't just the first debate, it was my last one.

I went over to thank the moderators, Dana Bash and Jake Tapper. Jake made a comment to Jill about the Phillies — an area of shared interest. Already trying to put some spin on the evening, I marveled to Dana and Jake about how much Donald Trump had lied. That may have been true, but it wasn't going to be the story coming out of the debate.

"How do you feel?" Jill asked me as we walked away.

"Well, I screwed that up."

Except my language was harsher.

As we walked down the hallway, Ron Klain fell into stride with me.



9780316598484_PromiseMeAmerica_int_1P.indd 340 7/17/26 1:51 PM

"Well?" I said.

"Not good," Ron replied.

I got into the car with Jill for the short ride to a watch party that was taking place nearby. My postdebate schedule was organized to be a triumphant tour — from the debate to the watch party to a local Waffle House for a quick bite before we flew out of Georgia for an early-morning rally on the tarmac in Raleigh, North Carolina. Somehow, I had to keep it from becoming a funeral march.

Jill and I got into the car to go to a nearby hotel to greet a gathering of supporters. Anthony Bernal and Annie Tomasini were in the car as well, and nobody spoke.

As we were pulling up, Annie offered two words: "Shoulders back."

This had become our shorthand. It meant stand up straight, march forward, survive, and move on.

At the watch party, Jill gamely tried to pump up the crowd.

God love everyone there, they had been waiting for hours, they had watched my debate performance, and still they cheered and applauded. It helped put some wind back in my sails.

Then we were off to the Waffle House, for what's called an OTR (short for "off the record"). It's a stop that's planned as a bit of a surprise rather than a fully built event. I forced a spring into my step, even "dapping up" a young man on the way in, in a clip that went viral.

I greeted the patrons, and this being a Waffle House in Georgia, there were some guys wearing MAGA hats. In the past, I've offered to trade one of my presidential caps to get them to put on something else — but that night I didn't have time to linger; it was on to my next stop.

I arrived in North Carolina at 1:40 a.m. There was a DJ and a marching band and a couple of hundred people having an early-morning dance party. Mayor Leonardo Williams gave it to me straight as he greeted me: "Mr. President, you sucked tonight. But I know you're going to do better." I spent an hour greeting the crowd.



9780316598484_PromiseMeAmerica_int_1P.indd 341 7/17/26 1:51 PM

But then I had to get a couple of hours of sleep and get to work on the next day's speech, showing that I was going to do better. Jill greeted me with a cup of coffee and a charge: "Ninety minutes isn't going to define your career. You can't let it."

I knew Jill was right. I had fought too hard for fifty years. I had accomplished too much as president. Most importantly, I had too much more I wanted to get done in the next four years to let that happen. But I knew I was facing a situation that was snowballing.

The press and the pundits had decided my performance was fatal. More worrying, leaders in the Democratic Party were reaching the same conclusion. The polling data didn't show it. In fact, some polls in the first few days after the debate actually showed me improving, with the race getting one to two points closer.[26]

It would take weeks of hammering in the press before the polls started to move downward. By comparison, in the days after losing his first debate with Mitt Romney, Barack had lost five points in the horse race. But the data wasn't the point. The narrative was. And the narrative was bad. There was a consensus that I had lost. Worse than that, there was a consensus that it couldn't be fixed.

In my remarks in Raleigh that day, I knew I needed to address what had happened at the debate. I knew I had to prove I had the energy and the strength and the clarity to run and win. I thought I did it that day. The reaction I got from the crowd was the most enthusiastic I had gotten all year. I was met with raucous cheers of "Four more years!" and "We love you, Joe!"

In my remarks, I admitted that I wasn't a young man but affirmed that I still knew how to tell the truth.[27] My performance that day was better than it had been all year. Anyone who was looking to see whether I could prove that I still had what it took to beat Trump would have seen it. I would soon find out, though, that a lot of minds had already been made up.

Over the next few weeks, I would undertake a furious effort to calm the waters. Virtually every conversation I had with leaders was



9780316598484_PromiseMeAmerica_int_1P.indd 342 7/17/26 1:51 PM

the same. They would tell me I had done more as president than anyone in their lifetime, but they were worried I couldn't win. People just felt I was too old. Then they would say that whether I stayed in the race was my decision to make. And they would respect whatever decision I made. In reality, the only decision they would respect would be my decision to exit the race.

I repeatedly said I intended to stay in the race. I said it in Raleigh the day after the debate. I said it in a letter I sent directly to every Democratic member of Congress. I said it to the press. I said it in every public event I held.

In the midst of this internal battle in the Democratic Party came one of the most important Supreme Court decisions in American history. On July 1, 2024, the court handed down their decision in *Trump v. United States*. Donald Trump had been given complete immunity for all his "official acts" as president — though the court didn't define what an "unofficial act" might be. There was no precedent for it. Common sense didn't support it. There was no constitutional basis for it. It was inexplicable. Indefensible. And a death knell for accountability. Donald Trump would not be held accountable for leading an insurrection against the United States. Donald Trump was a convicted felon and a sexual abuser. He had mishandled classified documents. He had led an insurrection. Now the Supreme Court seemed to grant Trump blanket immunity. No nation can survive character-free leadership for long. And we're no exception to that rule.

One way in which I'm unapologetically old-school is that I read the newspaper, online but also in print. I think op-eds matter. And the morning of July 10, I woke up to one in *The New York Times*, penned by George Clooney. He had been one of the hosts of the fundraiser I had traveled to after the G7 summit the month before, and he made the assertion that my debate performance wasn't an anomaly. It added fuel to the growing fire.

That same morning, after an appearance on *Morning Joe*, Nancy Pelosi came to see me privately in the White House. She had been



9780316598484_PromiseMeAmerica_int_1P.indd 343 7/17/26 1:51 PM

a great friend through the years. I admired her skill as speaker and as a legislative leader. I always saw her as the daughter of Tommy D'Alesandro, the former mayor of Baltimore, as opposed to the wealthy, liberal San Francisco Democrat caricatured in the Republican attack machine.

Now, she was making a "strategic reassessment." Publicly she was still saying it was my decision to make. But privately she was working furiously behind the scenes to get elected officials and Biden delegates to defect. She told me how great a president I had been. No one had gotten so much done. Then she told me how terrible my polling was and that I would be dragging her most vulnerable members down. She told me all the polling she had seen said I couldn't win, but I could be the George Washington of our time if I passed the torch. She asked me to get Mike Donilon, who was now on my campaign and no longer inside the White House, on the phone to go over the polling. I told her I trusted Mike. That he had been with me for forty years. And he had been right in 2016 and 2020 and 2022 when so many of the pollsters had gotten it wrong. Mike walked her through the numbers, making the case that the race was close and still winnable. She didn't buy any of it. She told me that I wasn't getting an honest assessment of where the race stood. She was blunt: There were no polls that said I had any chance to win.

The next day I hosted a NATO summit in Washington, DC. Once again, my efforts were focused on strengthening the alliance and continuing our rock-solid support for Ukraine. After it ended, I held a press conference and, for nearly an hour, answered one substantive question after another without notes and in great detail. But of course, the focus of the press would not be the substance or the details of my answers. It would be on how I'd mistakenly called Vice President Harris "Vice President Trump." It was a perfect example of what was happening to me. The fact that I was leading a stronger and more united NATO than the world had ever seen — and leading the effort to stand against the worst aggression seen in Europe since World



9780316598484_PromiseMeAmerica_int_1P.indd 344 7/17/26 1:51 PM

War II — didn't matter. But mixing up Harris and Trump? That was a big deal.

The day after the NATO summit, I headed to Detroit. The reaction I got there was even more enthusiastic than the one I had gotten in Raleigh the day after the debate. The crowd's message in Raleigh had been "We love you, Joe!" Their message in Detroit was "Don't you quit!" There was a yawning gap between what I was seeing with Democratic voters and what I was hearing from the Democratic leadership in Washington.

Chuck Schumer came to see me privately at my home in Rehoboth in the late afternoon of July 13. I had already had two difficult calls that afternoon, first with the Congressional Progressive Caucus and then with the New Democrat Coalition. During the first call, when I was challenged on my progressive bona fides, I took offense, reminding the group that I didn't need a lecture from anyone on what it means to be progressive. At that point, I was handed a note that said, "Stay positive, you are sounding defensive." I *was* defensive. I had delivered major progressive wins. To inject some levity into the call, I read the note aloud. This was then leaked and interpreted as evidence that I was being "stage managed." This was the environment I was now in. And it was the mood in which Chuck Schumer found me when he arrived.

Senator Schumer had been a strong supporter of my running for reelection. He started by telling me how great a president I had been . . . and that he was certain I was going to lose. Then he told me that at best I might still have five Democratic senators still supporting me. I was painfully aware of this. Within minutes of coming out of a meeting with the Senate Democratic Caucus a few days before, Jen, Steve, and Mike had marched straight into my office to tell me that the Senate Democrats had abandoned me.

Senator Schumer thought the race was over. I disagreed. When Chuck Schumer came to see me, the national polling average had me down three points to Trump. It was a margin-of-error race. To my



9780316598484_PromiseMeAmerica_int_1P.indd 345 7/17/26 1:51 PM

mind, a margin-of-error race is not a certain loss. It's a competitive race you can win. It doesn't mean it's easy. Or certain. But if you're down three points, or four or five, it is not a certain loss.

The widely held assumption that I wasn't following what was happening could not have been more at odds with reality. I followed it. Hell, I was living it. I knew exactly how many Democratic members of Congress and governors had pulled their support of me. I did phone calls with sitting members of Congress where no one held back. I met with the governors.

I wasn't living in a dream world. Here's where I was living:

I had won the Democratic nomination for president. And I had won it decisively.

I had a record of achievement as president second to none.

I had a vision for the future that I thought was right for the nation.

I believed I was the best person to lead the world.

Was I old? Yes. Was I able to do the job? Yes. Were voters angry about inflation? Yes. Were they angry about immigration? Yes. All tough problems. But not insurmountable ones.

Just look at history.

George H. W. Bush was down seventeen points to Massachusetts Governor Mike Dukakis in the summer of 1988. He came back to win. George W. Bush trailed John Kerry in 2004, until the August Swift Boat smear campaign attacking Kerry's Vietnam service took its toll. Barack Obama trailed Mitt Romney in early October 2012, after the first debate. Hillary Clinton was beating Donald Trump by six points just days before the 2016 election.

Where was I? The worst polls — *The New York Times* and *The Wall Street Journal* — had me down six points to Trump. Others had it as a two-point race. *The Washington Post* had the race tied. Fox showed me down by a single point. My own polls showed me down three to four points. The public average had me down three points.[28]

And what had been the impact from the debate? *The Washington Post* did an extensive analysis of the postdebate polling and concluded

that my vote had dropped 1.9 percent.[29] Less than two points, after an admittedly terrible performance and weeks and weeks of one of the worst poundings ever delivered by the free press.

I have to admit it was personally hard to take so many old friends turning on me. I told Schumer he had a lot of gumption (I may have said it differently at the time), coming to my home and telling me to get out of the race. Loyalty matters to me. If I give you my word, I stick with you. If I say I'm with you, I'm with you to the end.

After Chuck Schumer left, I went to an evening Mass, and that's where I was when my personal aide, Jacob Spreyer, tapped me on the shoulder. "Something happened to President Trump." I left and got in the car and called the director of the Secret Service for an update on what I learned was an assassination attempt. I headed back home, to be briefed by my domestic and national security teams. On the way, I placed a call to President Trump's lead Secret Service agent, Sean Curran, in order to reach President Trump. Sean told me that Trump was with his doctors. I asked Sean to send him my best and said I'd try back later.

Even with incomplete information, I felt I had to address the nation. The specter of political violence, the near assassination of a president, these called to mind some of the ugliest chapters in America's history.

We made hasty plans for me to speak from the Rehoboth Beach Police Department, which I did shortly after 8 p.m. I said that even as more information was coming to light, "there is no place in America for this kind of violence. It's sick… It's one of the reasons why we have to unite this country. We cannot allow for this to be happening. We cannot be like this. We cannot condone this."[30]

After I made the statement, I was briefed again and, shortly before 10 p.m., was able to reach President Trump.

Still not entirely sure about the extent of the security threat, we decided to head back to the White House, where we arrived shortly after midnight.



9780316598484_PromiseMeAmerica_int_1P.indd 347 7/17/26 1:51 PM

## THE DECISION

The calls for me to withdraw kept growing. Three days later, on July 16, I left DC for a two-day trip to Las Vegas. On the first day, I spoke to the NAACP. I began my remarks by reiterating that there was no place for political violence in our nation. I then spoke about my long years of work with the Black community. And what I found in Las Vegas at the NAACP convention was what I had found my whole career. The Black community is the most loyal community in politics. They had always had my back. And they still did. It was, for me, a moment of deep appreciation for a community that had stuck with me through thick and thin.

The next day I was scheduled to speak at the annual conference of UnidosUS, a Latino civil rights organization. I never got there. That morning I looked and sounded terrible. Sure enough, I tested positive for COVID. I wanted to find a way to speak to that group, but ultimately we canceled the event and headed back to Delaware to isolate and recover. After I'd led the country out of COVID, it was a cruel irony to be knocked back by the virus at such a critical moment in the campaign. But as I sat in my house in Rehoboth, I knew the decision was at hand as to whether to stay in the race.

A big factor was party unity. There was no way to beat Donald Trump without the party being united. That was one of the biggest lessons I took from Hillary Clinton's loss in 2016. The Bernie-Hillary split ran too deep in the party. The hard feelings from the primary were never dealt with. I'm not a guerilla or insurgent candidate. I believe in the importance of party, and the urgency of going into battle united. That's why in 2020, one of the first things I did after Super Tuesday was to reach out to Bernie and his supporters to tell them how much we needed them. I didn't want a repeat of 2016. And I'm convinced one of the reasons I won in 2020 was that every part of the Democratic coalition was on the same page.



9780316598484_PromiseMeAmerica_int_1P.indd 348 7/17/26 1:51 PM

I felt that I had been leading a united party for most of 2024. In fact, I would not have run if it had taken a divisive primary to secure the nomination. But no major player came forward to challenge me. No major leader came to me to say, "Don't run." Quite the opposite was true. Every major leader endorsed my running.

As I sat in Rehoboth thinking, party unity was weighing heavily on my mind. I believed the Democratic rank and file were still with me. And would be with me all the way to November. But it was clear that major Democratic elected officials and leaders weren't. It was clear that a lot of Democratic House members and Democratic US senators weren't with me. I had arrived at exactly what I had most hoped to avoid: a divided party.

As I met with Jill and a few members of my team who had come to Delaware over the weekend, it was the one thing I couldn't get out of my head. The party was deeply divided over my nomination.

Indeed, I had learned that Senator Patty Murray was planning to release a letter that revealed major defections in the Democratic Caucus. This weighed heavily on me, because even at that point, not a lot of leaders had been willing to put their names to a call for me to withdraw. And I wasn't just thinking about the people who wanted me to withdraw. I was also thinking about the people who wanted me to stay in. The Congressional Black Caucus. Congresswoman Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez. John Fetterman. Bernie Sanders. Jim Clyburn. Labor. Most importantly, I believed Democratic voters were sticking with me. Meanwhile, my campaign advisors were receiving word and reporting to me that if I chose to stick it out, it would be against the wishes of the Democratic leadership and Democratic donors, but the delegates who were pledged to vote for me on the first ballot would hold, and I would officially be nominated at the convention, now a month away.

The fact that so many major voices in our party were determined to force me out of the race, while so many others wanted me to stay



9780316598484_PromiseMeAmerica_int_1P.indd 349 7/17/26 1:51 PM

in, spoke to the dilemma I faced. I asked a few members of my team what it would look like if I did decide to leave the race — what the mechanics of it would be. I asked Mike to draft a statement, and when he came back to me with language, I said I'd sleep on it.

Believe it or not, I slept well that night.

I got up on Sunday, July 21, having made my decision. There were only five or six people who knew what was coming. And because I had a tight and loyal team, the news didn't leak.

---

But before I made my decision public, I had something else I had to do. Over the previous years, Vladimir Putin had been pursuing a galling campaign of hostage taking, so he could then use captured innocents to secure the release of some very not-innocent Russians who were being held in prisons around the world for crimes ranging from arms dealing to murder.

A high-profile instance of this occurred in February 2022, when Russian authorities arrested Brittney Griner, the star basketball player with the Phoenix Mercury and double Olympic gold medalist, who was entering Russia to play for a team there.

After months of negotiations, we were able to secure a deal for her release. In return, Vladimir Putin wanted the release of Viktor Bout, a Russian arms dealer. In December 2022, we did a prisoner exchange and brought Brittney Griner home.

In March 2023, *Wall Street Journal* reporter Evan Gershkovich was working on a story that took him about a thousand miles east of Moscow to write about how the Russians were refurbishing tanks to get them back into service against Ukraine. Russian agents grabbed him from a restaurant. For the first time since the Cold War, a journalist working for an American newspaper had been arrested and charged with spying.



9780316598484_PromiseMeAmerica_int_1P.indd 350 7/17/26 1:51 PM

When told that an American has been kidnapped by a foreign power, the first thing we do is perform an "equities check" — we scour our records to make sure that the person isn't acting as an agent of one of our government entities, an accusation foreign leaders often make.

Evan was completely free of any involvement; he was just a good journalist. This allowed us to designate him as "wrongfully detained" and begin to seek his release. A Russian kangaroo court had found him guilty of espionage and sentenced him to sixteen years in a penal colony.[31]

In April 2023, at the White House Correspondents' Dinner, I had a chance to meet Brittney Griner in person for the first time, backstage before my speech. It was a joy to be able to see her doing so well and give her a hug.

My next visitor backstage, however, reminded me of how much more needed to be done. It was Evan Gershkovich's mother. She gripped my hand and said: "You are the only one who can bring my boy home."

My speech that evening, in keeping with tradition, included plenty of jokes. I poked fun at my age: "I really feel great. I'm campaigning all over the country: Pennsylvania, Georgia, North Carolina. I've always done well in the original thirteen colonies." I poked fun at Donald Trump: "Trump's so desperate, he started reading those Bibles he's selling." I poked fun at the media: "*The New York Times* issued a statement blasting me for, quote, 'actively and effectively avoiding independent journalists.' Hey, if that's what it takes to get *The New York Times* to say I'm active and effective, I'm for it!"

But then I turned to my serious point. Speaking of Evan Gershkovich and Alsu Kurmasheva, a Radio Free Europe reporter whom Putin had also detained, I said: "Journalism is clearly not a crime. Not here, not there, not anywhere in the world. And Putin should release Evan and Alsu immediately…And I give you my word as a Biden, we're not going to give up until we get them home. All of them."[32]



9780316598484_PromiseMeAmerica_int_1P.indd 351 7/17/26 1:51 PM

Fulfilling that promise was no simple effort. The prize Putin most wanted was a professional hit man named Vadim Krasikov, who had gunned down a Russian dissident in a Berlin park in broad daylight, and who was in prison in Germany. The exchange would be part of a larger prisoner swap, involving multiple Western political prisoners and Russian convicts. It would require a complicated series of negotiations involving Russia, Germany, Poland, Norway, Turkey, and Slovenia. Releasing the killer was against Germany's immediate interest but, I argued, in the longer-term interest of our alliance and the need to save the lives of US and EU citizens and Russian dissidents. Chancellor Olaf Scholz had a tough call to make. But he and I had a long history and a durable partnership. Ultimately, he said to me, "For you, I will do this." Yet another reminder that all politics is personal. To finalize the deal, I needed to ask Slovenian Prime Minister Robert Golob to accelerate their judicial system's process in order to release a married couple of Russian spies. It was the last piece that needed to fall into place to bring the historic deal together. In one moment, I had made the decision to drop out of the presidential race. In the next, I made the call to Prime Minister Golob.

As Golob would say later, with a "little help of true friends, nothing is impossible."[33] In all, twenty-four people would be released, including Evan Gershkovich, Alsu Kurmasheva, and former US Marine Paul Whelan. Friends matter. Allies matter.

These exchanges also said a lot about the difference between American and Russian priorities. Vladimir Putin wanted to bring home arms dealers and murderers. We wanted to bring home innocents: journalists, veterans, aid workers, and others. I didn't love the asymmetry of it, but I also didn't agree with the claim of some critics that the United States gave away too much in these deals. I think they served to powerfully highlight who we are as a country.



9780316598484_PromiseMeAmerica_int_1P.indd 352 7/17/26 1:51 PM

The call with Golob completed, the historic hostage agreement done, I now turned to my political future. I was at peace with my decision; now we needed to manage the logistics of a withdrawal.

I didn't want to have to go through the filter of the press to announce my decision, and since I was still sick with COVID, an address to the nation seemed inadvisable, never mind that the planning of an event would have led to speculation and leaks. So we got to work on a letter to the American people. I wrote about what we had accomplished and then turned to the crux of the matter:

> It has been the greatest honor of my life to serve as your President. And while it has been my intention to seek reelection, I believe it is in the best interest of my party and the country for me to stand down and to focus solely on fulfilling my duties as President for the remainder of my term.[34]

Yes, the campaign was over. I took an oath to serve the American people for four full years, and I still had six months left in my presidency. I was determined to make the most of it.

At 1:04 p.m., I broke the news to Jen O'Malley Dillon, my campaign chair. I believed then, and I believe now, that if anyone was going to get us across the finish line, it would have been Jen.

At 1:08, I called Jeff Zients and told him.

At 1:11, I called Vice President Harris. She was at the Naval Observatory, the vice president's residence, with her team. She asked me several times if I was sure I wanted to do this. I told her I was. She then asked when I would endorse her, wanting to ensure that there wasn't enough daylight between my departure and my endorsement to let others enter the fray. I had wanted there to be some time for my news to be metabolized, and for my withdrawal to stand alone as a historic document. Including an endorsement would have made it a



9780316598484_PromiseMeAmerica_int_1P.indd 353 7/17/26 1:51 PM

political one, but I understood her perspective. I told her I'd get right back to her.

My next call, at 1:25, was to Jim Clyburn. With his typical practicality, he both advised and admonished me to take control of the process by endorsing my vice president.

At 1:32, I called Kamala back and told her that Steve Ricchetti and Mike Donilon were working through endorsement language as we spoke, and that I would announce my endorsement within a half hour.

At 1:45, I gathered my senior staff on a call and told them I was ending my campaign. As that was happening, my team released the letter I had written. I didn't give my staff much time to absorb the news, because in my next breath I told them that while I wouldn't have a campaign to run, we still had work to do.

At 1:46 p.m. on July 21, I withdrew from the presidential race. I was no longer a candidate for president.

---

Steve Ricchetti, who had been by my side throughout the whole process, assembled a list of calls for me to make after the announcement. And despite the fact that I was still coughing and hoarse from COVID, that's what I did until 9:00 p.m., thanking supporters and marshaling support for Vice President Harris.

Secretary Antony Blinken, 2:10 p.m. Historian Jon Meacham, 2:13 p.m. Senator Chris Coons, 2:28 p.m. Senator Chuck Schumer, 2:33 p.m. Leader Hakeem Jeffries, 2:37 p.m. Senator Bernie Sanders, 2:46 p.m. Senator Bob Casey, 2:48 p.m. Senator Maggie Hassan, 2:49 p.m. Senator Alex Padilla, 2:52 p.m. Governor Josh Shapiro, 2:55 p.m. Governor Roy Cooper, 2:58 p.m. Representative Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez, 3:09 p.m. President Bill Clinton, 3:14 p.m. Representative Lisa Blunt Rochester, 6:55 p.m. AFL-CIO President Liz



9780316598484_PromiseMeAmerica_int_1P.indd 354 7/17/26 1:51 PM

Shuler, 6:58 p.m. Governor Gretchen Whitmer, 7:06 p.m., although that call went to voicemail. Senator Tammy Duckworth, 7:16 p.m.

Representative Veronica Escobar, 7:26 p.m. Senator John Fetterman, 7:32 p.m. AFSCME President Lee Saunders, 7:36 p.m. Ironworkers President Eric Dean, 7:39 p.m. Governor Wes Moore, 7:52 p.m. Electrical Workers President Kenny Cooper, 7:59 p.m. Senator Mark Kelly, 8:02 p.m. Senator Elizabeth Warren, 8:06 p.m. Senator Jon Ossoff, 8:11 p.m. Building Trades President Sean McGarvey, 8:15 p.m. Steelworkers International President Dave McCall, 8:19 p.m. Governor Phil Murphy, 8:31 p.m. Representative Linda Sánchez, 8:35 p.m. Representative Brendan Boyle, 8:37 p.m. Representative Robert Garcia, 8:45 p.m. Representative Nanette Barragán, 8:48 p.m. Representative Haley Stevens, 8:53 p.m. Representative Rosa DeLauro, 8:56 p.m.

Even with a list that long, there are so many others I wish I could have called. There aren't enough hours in a lifetime of days for me to have reached out to everyone I wanted to.

At one point in the afternoon, my daughter Ashley came over. I still hadn't fully recovered from COVID and was trying to stay distanced from people. But sometimes it is impossible to keep your distance. Ashley fell into my arms for a long hug. It may have been a violation of COVID best practices, but it healed our hearts.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

# A SPRINT TO THE FINISH

As I walked to the podium on September 24, 2024, I looked out at the 1,800 delegates in front of me. I was in the grand General Assembly Hall of the United Nations. I was about to address the UN for the last time as president.

I had come to speak about the sweep of history I had been privileged to witness — and participate in. When I entered public life, Brezhnev led the Soviet Union, Golda Meir led Israel, Mao led China. The world had been divided by the Cold War, the Middle East was headed to war, and America was at war in Vietnam.

But even if we faced challenges that seemed insurmountable at times, I never felt hopeless. Quite the opposite. I believed deeply that it was within our power, as public servants and as leaders, to make things better. And that's what I had tried to do. In the 1980s, I spoke out against apartheid in South Africa and watched that racist regime fall. In the 1990s, I worked to hold Serbia's Slobodan Milošević accountable for war crimes. Then, as vice president, I



9780316598484_PromiseMeAmerica_int_1P.indd 357 7/17/26 1:51 PM

watched US forces bring Osama bin Laden to justice. As president, I had led the world's opposition to Vladimir Putin's illegal attempt to erase Ukraine from the map.

I reminded the audience that there will always be forces that pull our world apart, but that our solemn responsibility is to make sure that the forces holding us together are even stronger. We have no choice. We must not grow weary. We must stand up for democracy, and for the principles of self-government enshrined in the US Constitution and the UN Charter. And toward that end, we must help the next generation take over that work.

As I said to my fellow heads of state, "Let us never forget, some things are more important than staying in power."[1] That is the essence of democracy.

Admittedly, I had not started the year thinking that I would be relinquishing power. I know I opened the door with my performance at the debate. I could have fought to the convention. Taken the fight to the floor. Forced a vote. And probably prevailed. After all, I had over 3,900 delegates. I needed 1,976. But I didn't want to be a battered and bruised nominee leading a divided party. I wanted a united party. I didn't want a nominee who limped to the nomination. I wanted a nominee who would leave the convention with the wind at their back.

When I made the decision to withdraw from the race, I was widely praised for an act of statesmanship. For the rare act of a politician stepping aside for the good of the party and the country. No one said I had consigned the party to failure or certain defeat.

I picked Kamala Harris in 2020 because I believed she would be the best person to be president if I couldn't do the job. I endorsed her quickly because there were strong voices in the party clamoring for a contested open primary. I didn't think that was practical or wise. It reflected a huge blind spot regarding the base of the party, and who was going to be in the hall as delegates in Chicago. Any contested open fight would have been seen as an attempt to block the first Black



9780316598484_PromiseMeAmerica_int_1P.indd 358 7/17/26 1:51 PM

female vice president from the top of the ticket, and it would have split the party. After the election, the longtime Democratic strategist and party leader Donna Brazile and other prominent Black women leaders in the party said as much when they said that if there had been a fight at the convention and Kamala hadn't been the nominee, they would have walked out. Some of the prominent leaders like Gretchen Whitmer and California Governor Gavin Newsom understood that. That's why they took their names out of the running preemptively.

Still, a significant number of Democratic leaders did not want Kamala to be the nominee. Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez, who had urged me to stay in the race, had already said publicly that the behind-the-scenes effort in the party wasn't only to run me out of the race but to prevent Kamala from being the nominee.[2]

My mother often said you're defined by your courage, but you're redeemed by your loyalty. How you treat people matters. As vice president, I had been 100 percent loyal to Barack Obama. As president, I was going to be 100 percent loyal to Kamala Harris.

The Democratic National Convention in Chicago was kind of an out-of-body experience. The 2020 convention I had planned as the Democratic nominee was upended because of COVID. Now the 2024 convention I had planned was no longer to nominate me.

My speaking slot was on Monday night. I arrived with my immediate family on Air Force One. The campaign had chartered a plane for my extended family to join us from Wilmington. Other assorted friends and supporters joined us, for a contingent of upward of several dozen people, and trying to make the most of our changed circumstances, we enjoyed a celebratory dinner. Because the speaking program was running late, we had a chance to catch up with Bill and Hillary Clinton.

Ashley gave the speech introducing me, and it was beautiful. She shared a memory that was as vivid to her as it was to me — of meeting me on the platform of the Wilmington Amtrak station so our family could sing her "Happy Birthday" before I got back on a southbound



9780316598484_PromiseMeAmerica_int_1P.indd 359 7/17/26 1:51 PM

train to make late-night votes. She described the election as "the fight of our lifetime, our freedom, our democracy, our reproductive rights. All of this, all of it, is on the ballot, and I know together we can do this because my dad helped show us the way."[3] She was right, of course, about the stakes of the election.

When I walked out onstage, the reception was loud and long and heartfelt. The crowd was holding signs reading "We ♥ Joe." I spoke about how I had given fifty years of my life to public service. I said I loved the job of being president. But I loved my country more. I said I would be the best volunteer Kamala's campaign would have. When my speech ended, Kamala came out to greet me. It was a gracious gesture. I believed at that moment she was going to be president.

After her convention speech a couple of days later, so did most every Democrat. And the press. And the pundits. And the donors. And a majority of Americans too. She inherited a united party. And she created an enthusiastic one: Kamala electrified the country. She was a first-rate candidate. She performed masterfully in her debate with President Trump. She was great on the stump. She was a fund-raising machine. I was proud of her and the campaign she ran.

## SCRANTON

Even before the election, I had a sense of coming home. That sense deepened on Saturday, November 2, as I campaigned for Kamala in Scranton. Pennsylvania is of course a critical state for anyone who wants to win the presidency, and I was happy to do my part for her and the team. But also, it was a chance to see old friends and reconnect with the city that did so much to shape me. The Electric City is special. As I said that day, "Scranton becomes part of your heart."[4]

It was a joy to be back, but there were signs that the election was going to be close. My fellow Scranton native Bob Casey was neck and neck in a battle for his Senate seat (which he ultimately lost). And organized labor seemed divided, like the rest of America.



9780316598484_PromiseMeAmerica_int_1P.indd 360 7/17/26 1:51 PM

It wasn't like it used to be. For more than a century, the rank and file had voted overwhelmingly for Democrats, the party that always stood up for them, on every possible issue, from minimum wage to health benefits to the right to collective bargaining. But in the harsh crosswinds of the twenty-first century, that was no longer a safe assumption. Trump had made inroads with his false promises to restore manufacturing and his stoking of racial resentments. As a result, Lackawanna County was in play. Barack and I had won it by more than twenty points in 2008 and 2012, but Hillary Clinton won it by only three points in 2016, before I won it by eight in 2020.

Earlier in the year, when I was running, I had received the endorsements of the United Steelworkers Union and the United Auto Workers Union. I was gratified to have them standing with me. I felt I had fulfilled my pledge to stand with them as no president ever had before.

In fact, that was literally true. Late in 2023, the UAW went on strike against the big US automakers.

Traditionally, the role of presidents in labor strikes has not been on the side of the striking workers, to put it mildly. Rutherford B. Hayes deployed federal troops to break an 1877 railroad workers' strike. Grover Cleveland did something similar in 1894. Ronald Reagan famously fired over eleven thousand striking air traffic controllers in 1981.

When I became president, I took inspiration from presidents like Franklin Roosevelt and Lyndon Johnson, who had advanced the cause of labor. I had made Marty Walsh the first union member to be secretary of labor in a half century. I had included the Butch Lewis Emergency Pension Plan Relief Act in the American Rescue Plan, saving union pensions. And then I'd gone further. Even when past presidents had philosophically stood with unions, no sitting president had ever walked a picket line. I wanted to change that.

The Secret Service had some reservations about my plan to wade into a crowd that might not be 100 percent friendly toward me. There was some discussion about seeing if the UAW would replace the wooden



9780316598484_PromiseMeAmerica_int_1P.indd 361 7/17/26 1:51 PM

stakes holding their picket signs with cardboard tubes. I appreciated the concern, and I recognize that, given the choice, you'd rather be whacked with a poster tube than a two-by-four, but I wasn't really expecting anyone to take a swing at me. I've found that when you stand with someone, a lot of what might have divided you melts away.

As I arrived at General Motors' Willow Run parts center outside Detroit in the presidential limo (a very custom build courtesy of General Motors), joined by UAW President Shawn Fain, we heard the workers chanting, "No deal, no wheels! No pay, no parts!"

These workers had made a lot of concessions to save the auto industry in the financial crisis of 2008. Now the industry was thriving, and if the companies were doing well, it was right that the workers should be doing well too. I was handed a bullhorn and stepped up onto a couple of shipping pallets. My message was simple: "We saved them; it's about time for them to step up for us."

I chose those words, "we" and "us," deliberately. The presidency forces a lot of choices. At every juncture, I stood with America's working families. I asked them to stick with it, and to know that their president was with them. The UAW strike lasted about a month and a half and was a resounding victory for the workers: a 25 percent wage increase over four years, restored cost of living adjustments, greater benefits for retirees, and much more.

But in September the Teamsters announced that they would not endorse either Kamala Harris or Donald Trump. Given that the Teamsters had backed Democratic candidates for thirty years, this was considered a setback to the Democratic cause. It was a particular finger in the eye to me and to Kamala, as one of our first acts, with the American Rescue Plan, had been to save their pensions.

At the end of September, just over a month before the election, another labor issue came to a head when the contract came up for renewal for eighty-five thousand members of the International Longshoremen's Association (ILA), the men and women who were working at the thirty-nine East Coast ports that handle nearly half of



9780316598484_PromiseMeAmerica_int_1P.indd 362 7/17/26 1:51 PM

American trade. Jared Bernstein, who had succeeded Ceci Rouse as the chair of my Council of Economic Advisers, often told me that the challenge with inflation is that it goes up like a rocket and down like a feather. A shutdown of as much as a week could rocket inflation back up. It would also slow the recovery and rebuilding in the wake of Hurricane Helene, which had struck the Southeastern United States with deadly and devastating force earlier that month. Yet union and company negotiators were so far apart they had broken off negotiations several months earlier. The US Chamber of Commerce and some elected officials were telling me to suspend any strike, using temporary power granted to me under the 1947 Taft-Hartley Law. It was a complicated situation. The shipping companies had several tough years before the pandemic but were now reaping substantial profits. The dockworkers had seen declines in their real wages because they were under the terms of the pre-pandemic contract.

I asked for a briefing in the Oval with Lael Brainard, who had succeeded Brian Deese as the director of my National Economic Council, Labor Secretary Julie Su, who had succeeded Marty Walsh (who had left to lead the National Hockey League Players' Association), and Transportation Secretary Pete Buttigieg.

They laid out the facts, particularly around invoking Taft-Hartley. I picked up the phone and asked my assistant, Julia Reed, to connect me to Harold Daggett, the international president of the ILA. Harold didn't pick up, so I left him a message to the effect of, "Harold, Joe Biden. I am being asked to invoke Taft-Hartley to end your strike. But I want you to know, I don't believe in that, and I'm not going to do it."

This is what it means to be a pro-union president, and one who cares about working families and the middle class. I wasn't about to use my power to crush the chances for eighty-five thousand workers to get a better contract and decent wages, or to aid largely foreign companies in squeezing American workers. But I also wasn't going to let a protracted strike crush the American economy. So I had Julie, Pete, and Lael invite the representatives of the United States Maritime



9780316598484_PromiseMeAmerica_int_1P.indd 363 7/17/26 1:51 PM

Alliance, the shippers' and port operators' negotiating organization, to the White House to encourage them to put a better offer on the table. That didn't yield a deal, and the workers went on strike. For every day on strike, the backlog at the ports would multiply by several days — time was very much of the essence.

I then had my team reach out to the global CEOs of the shipping companies, most of whom were based in Europe and Asia; a series of calls facilitated by our ambassadorial corps. These folks weren't used to hearing from the White House, and the message was simple: The president of the United States wanted them to get a good agreement done. Lael largely worked with the shippers, while Julie worked with the union representatives. It took two days and nights filled with tense phone calls, and by Thursday, October 3, the two sides had reached an agreement that provided better wages and health care and pension benefits. When it was finalized in January, the ILA would call it "the greatest Collective Bargaining Agreement in the union's 132-year history."[5] It was good for workers, and good for America's economy.

The ILA, which had endorsed me in 2020, chose not to make an endorsement in the 2024 race.

Still, I wanted to go back to Scranton and argue that we were the party — and Kamala the candidate — for working families.

---

The election came three days later. I invited members of staff to attend a watch party with me in the White House. We had a buffet with chicken parm and some of my other favorite dishes, and TVs were set up around the Blue Room and the Green Room. It was good to be together with the brilliant team who had always been there for me, through every up and down of the presidency.

As results began to come in, I made calls to the candidates I knew to congratulate or console, or, if the race was too close to call, to see



9780316598484_PromiseMeAmerica_int_1P.indd 364 7/17/26 1:51 PM

what they were hearing. It was gratifying to be able to congratulate several of my fellow Delawareans: our new senator, Lisa Blunt Rochester; our new governor, Matt Meyer; a new member of Congress, Sarah McBride; and the new mayor of Wilmington, John Carney. I was able to reach Andy Kim, who had been elected to the senate from New Jersey; Angela Alsobrooks, who had won her race for senate in Maryland; and Josh Stein, who had won his election for governor of North Carolina.

One particularly gratifying call I made was to Maggie Goodlander, who had won a congressional seat in New Hampshire. Maggie had served as an intelligence officer in the Navy Reserve and worked in the Senate for my friends Joe Lieberman and John McCain. She also happened to be married to Jake Sullivan. These calls reinforced for me that there was a rising generation of Democratic political talent to be excited about.

At around 10 p.m., my political director, Emmy Ruiz, received an update from the Harris campaign and grabbed me to brief me. As she talked me through what they were hearing, staff gathered around. It wasn't looking great, particularly in Pennsylvania.

I turned to Annie and asked her to get Bobby Brady on the phone. Bobby was a former congressman and the long-serving chairman of the Philadelphia Democratic Party, and he was a good friend.

"Bobby, it's Joe. What's going on?"

"We dont have the count."

It was 10:30 p.m., and that was all I needed to hear. I called Josh Shapiro, the governor of Pennsylvania, in the hopes that he might have something more positive to share. He didn't. Black turnout was down. Labor was divided. We didn't have the count.

The results came through in the middle of the night. It was close in the popular vote — seventy-seven million to seventy-five million, or 49.8 percent to 48.3 percent. Neither side won a majority. But the margin was wider in the electoral vote, 312 to 226. It was far from a mandate, but Donald Trump would be the forty-seventh president,



9780316598484_PromiseMeAmerica_int_1P.indd 365 7/17/26 1:51 PM

having already been the forty-fifth. For the first time since Grover Cleveland, a president would serve non-successive terms.

## THE AMERICAN EXPERIMENT ENDURES

More often than not, the last few months of an administration are a limping affair, with staff fleeing, and a notable absence of big speeches and initiatives. I wanted to deliver the best final two months of any president in modern history. We could still do a lot to further and protect our gains.

The truth was that I couldn't be certain how Donald Trump would govern during his second term. In the past he had surprised his supporters as well as his critics with flashes of moderation. Would President Trump tack back toward the center and work on big-ticket legislation, with support from both parties? Or would he follow the darker impulses that had been so evident on the campaign trail, where he'd blamed Democrats and people of color for everything that had ever gone wrong, and begun to talk ominously — especially after the failed assassination attempt on July 13 — about God's special plans for him?[6]

An apocalyptic Trump would be highly divisive, especially for a president who had won only a narrow victory, with less than half the American people behind him. The nineteenth-century French diplomat and writer Alexis de Tocqueville marveled at the way Americans lived out the daily miracle of democracy — listening to one another's concerns at town meetings, stepping forward to run for office, accepting defeats and moving on. He called these values and behaviors our "habits of the heart." I was worried that these precious habits could quickly corrode under a government that tried to tear down institutions and inflame hatreds.

I had specific concerns as well. The Republicans had won the Senate and House, which meant they could attempt to roll back our legislative progress, especially the big bills we passed in 2021 and 2022.



9780316598484_PromiseMeAmerica_int_1P.indd 366 7/17/26 1:51 PM

That would mean harder times for working families, asked to pay higher premiums for their health care.[7] There was a good chance they would chip away at Social Security and Medicare. Tax rates would be slashed for billionaires — the American oligarchs who were already bending the knee before Trump and offering huge emoluments in return for special treatment.

I worried about our friends overseas as well. For Ukraine, reliant on support from the United States, it would be grim waiting for aid to be dished out piecemeal, with humiliating demands for subservience, as Trump resumed his obsequious behavior toward Vladimir Putin. Predictably, Putin was ecstatic at the news of Trump's win.[8]

China would surely take advantage of a chaotic and easily distracted president to press forward with its huge naval buildup and its quest to get our most sophisticated chips. With them, China had a good chance of catching up to us and ultimately passing us in the most sensitive technologies relating to AI, quantum computing, and hypersonic weapons. American leadership in the world would recede as a president's personal whims replaced any genuine strategy. Little would be done to combat climate change, an existential threat that confronts all peoples on earth — but which Trump had called a hoax.

Still, I had worked so hard over the previous four years to restore norms, and one more that I wanted to restore was a seamless, peaceful transition. It was important to respect the decision of the American people, and to respect the new president-elect — even if he had not extended the same courtesy to me four years earlier. We needed to restore the world's trust in American democracy. A peaceful transfer of power was a key symbol of that.

I gave a speech in the Rose Garden on November 7, two days after the election and one day after Kamala's remarks at Howard University, thanking her supporters. Her remarks, I felt, struck an important balance. She asserted, rightly, that "a fundamental principle of American democracy is that when we lose an election, we accept the results.



9780316598484_PromiseMeAmerica_int_1P.indd 367 7/17/26 1:51 PM

That principle, as much as any other, distinguishes democracy from monarchy or tyranny. And anyone who seeks the public trust must honor it." And she reminded us of democracy's other great obligation: "While I concede this election, I do not concede the fight that fueled this campaign — the fight: the fight for freedom, for opportunity, for fairness, and the dignity of all people."

I wanted to build on her moving and masterful words by praising election workers, and reminding the entire country that "you can't love your country only when you win."[9] Acceptance of the results — one of the crucial habits of the heart — was essential for any democracy worthy of the name.

I also wanted to remind Americans that there was still work to be done in the seventy-four days remaining. I asked that we "bring down the temperature," begin the work of coming back together, and "make every day count." I reminded Democrats of the mantra that had shaped my life: When you get knocked down, you get back up. Most importantly, as I put it, "The American experiment endures."

I thought it was important to say these things in public. But in private, I remained worried, as Trump was striking a vengeful tone in his comments and threatening harsh reprisals against anyone who had ever crossed him.[10] Already, he and his team were throwing sharp elbows. The January 6 rioters were clamoring to be released from prison and pardoned.[11] There was a rising fear of deportations, even among legal immigrants. And it was clear that we were heading toward a new era in our foreign policy, one that was profoundly troubling for our allies.

In my personal calls with leaders, I did my best to reassure our allies that the alliance could survive whatever disruptions were coming. But I could sense their concern. We had come a long way together, in Ukraine and in other places. I had been deeply touched when Germany's president, Frank-Walter Steinmeier, gave me his country's highest honor, the Order of Merit, for my service to the Atlantic community and our alliances. The ceremony had taken place a few weeks



9780316598484_PromiseMeAmerica_int_1P.indd 368 7/17/26 1:51 PM

earlier, on October 18. His remarks perhaps did a better job of encapsulating my foreign policy than I could have done on my own.

> Mr. President: In our most dangerous moment since the Cold War, to have you and your administration on our side is no less than a historical stroke of good fortune. For us here in Europe, the past two years have shown once again: America truly is the indispensable nation. But it has also shown something else: NATO is the indispensable alliance.[12]

Indeed, it was a dangerous moment. And in that moment, what was revealed was the power of democracy and the power of alliances. I put faith in both, and that faith was rewarded.

Steinmeier's remarks were also funny. He revealed that Germany had kept meticulous records on me during my long career as a senator. Almost a half century earlier, I had come to what was then West Germany to meet with German officials, and being German, they had taken perfect notes and then maintained them all these years. President Steinmeier drew a huge laugh when he read from them, and noted an early prediction that I might have a "significant political future."

As the saying goes, that future ain't what it used to be, but I was still thinking about the days that lay ahead. Specifically, I was doing all that I could to consolidate our gains. A particular concern was our climate work. So we doubled down in the final weeks, racing to award hundreds of millions in climate grants and finalize regulations.[13]

By coincidence, a UN climate change conference was opening in Baku, Azerbaijan, in the immediate aftermath of the election. That city — a major source of oil and gas — was a peculiar choice to host a meeting designed to lower emissions. While the US election cast a pall over the proceedings, we were still able to work with our counterparts and achieve good results, specifically in the area of finding



9780316598484_PromiseMeAmerica_int_1P.indd 369 7/17/26 1:51 PM

innovative finance mechanisms to support the climate work of developing nations.[14]

I also wanted to do what I could to protect public servants from future attacks from the Trump administration, simply because they worked on issues he disliked. For a long time, Trump had used his social media posts and speeches to threaten retribution against anyone who got in his way. In fact, when voters were asked for one word they associated with Donald Trump's plans for a second term, the word cloud assembled from their responses revealed that the most prominent word was "revenge." Donald Trump posted it proudly on his social media account.[15]

## A PRESIDENTIAL COURTESY

Eight days after the election, I honored another presidential tradition by hosting a visit from the president-elect. Jill and I met President Trump and his entourage in the Diplomatic Reception Room, and then I escorted him into the Oval Office for our formal meeting, accompanied only by our chiefs of staff, Jeff Zients and Susie Wiles. He and I sat in chairs near a roaring fire; Jeff and Susie sat on sofas.

President Trump was immediately chatty and surprised me by adopting a tone so friendly that I thought he might be putting me on. It bordered on fawning. "You know, Joe, if it weren't for politics, I believe we'd be good friends." I think I blinked, too stunned to respond. Then he kept going, as if intoxicated by the curious conversational path he had chosen. "Yes, if it weren't for politics, we'd spend all our time golfing together." He said my performance on job creation had been "extraordinary."

He added that he was relieved he didn't have to run against me. I didn't really understand why he was buttering me up, so I cut off his compliments to move on to the business at hand. I wanted to give him a wide-ranging overview of the issues that I thought would dominate his presidency, because a lot had happened since January 2021.



9780316598484_PromiseMeAmerica_int_1P.indd 370 7/17/26 1:51 PM

It was essentially a tour of the world, including Ukraine, NATO, Russia, Gaza and the Middle East, China, the Americas, and Africa. He nodded appreciatively. But I noticed a curious pattern: He focused on the personalities of the leaders, as if we were sharing gossip about people at a dinner party. Still, I had a lot to share with him, and our conversation, scheduled for thirty minutes, ran for close to two hours.

## SOUTH AMERICA

The next day, I embarked on a six-day trip to South America, to attend an APEC summit in Lima and a G20 meeting in Rio. Each organization was important to the stability of our hemisphere, but there were other reasons to go as well. I would have another summit with Xi Jinping in Peru, my last one before leaving office, to build on the progress we had made in San Francisco a year earlier.

The APEC meeting in Peru, between November 15 and 16, got us off to a good start. The leaders saluted me for my service, and Xi and I had another productive summit.

But I could not help feeling apprehensive about the future of the relationship.[16] The United States was still in a position of strength, thanks to the export controls on our best chips and the global attractiveness of the American model, including our protections for democracy and human rights. But the strangeness of our politics was once again undermining US foreign policy, with no one entirely sure what direction Trump would go in. That made it difficult to make long-term commitments.

China faced no such difficulty. Around the world, China was continuing to expand its Belt and Road Initiative, and to supplement it with other forms of infrastructure, including 5G networks. Dozens of countries from South America, Central America, and the Caribbean had signed up, nearly all of them during the four years that preceded my administration.



9780316598484_PromiseMeAmerica_int_1P.indd 371 7/17/26 1:51 PM

Peru, where we were meeting, was suddenly front and center in that global effort. On the first day we were there, November 14, the Chinese dedicated a $3.5 billion deepwater port in Chancay, a city to the north of Lima. It was another sign that China was serious about playing in our backyard.[17]

But that was only one of many concerns raised by the port. The Chinese were unlikely to stop there, and if they built rail and road networks across South America, to extract Brazil's natural resources, then those roads would imperil the Amazon rainforest. Historically, the Andes have made it difficult to move goods from east to west in South America, but Chinese engineers were already hard at work on the problem. That could mean that in a matter of years, one of the world's great ecosystems and one of Earth's great carbon sinks would vanish, bringing us another step closer to a climate catastrophe.[18]

To call attention to these problems, I planned to visit the rainforest on my way to Rio for the G20. The helicopter ride over the forest canopy was both thrilling and sobering — the loss of rainforest, due to illegal logging, farming, and development, was clear from the air. But I enjoyed meeting with the rainforest's defenders, including indigenous leaders and climate scientists.[19]

I then flew into Rio de Janeiro for the G20 summit, hosted by my friend, Brazil's president, Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva, known far and wide as Lula. The summit, organized around the theme of "Building a Just World and a Sustainable Planet," went well, and included new initiatives to reduce hunger and poverty. It also marked the first time we had included a representative from the African Union, largely because of US support for the idea. That would help to set up my next trip.

## AFRICA

For Thanksgiving, we resumed the family tradition of going to Nantucket. But as soon as we finished the Thanksgiving meal, it was



9780316598484_PromiseMeAmerica_int_1P.indd 372 7/17/26 1:51 PM

back to work, as my team was beginning to make real progress in the Middle East.

The central stage of the conflict remained Gaza; but from Israel's perspective, there were enemies in all directions, including to the north, in Lebanon, where the Iranian-backed terrorist group Hezbollah had been firing rockets into Israel since the Hamas attack of October 7, 2023. Naturally, Israel had fought back. The result was a simmering quasi-war that had dislocated tens of thousands and contributed to the general instability of the region.

Then in September and October, the balance of power shifted. Israel located and assassinated the head of Hezbollah, Hassan Nasrallah, on September 27. After that, Hezbollah was ready to come to the table. We worked hard to bring the parties to an agreement, which finally came on November 27. It mandated a sixty-day cease-fire and freed us to turn our attention to the on-again, off-again talks between Hamas and Israel.[20]

This gave us momentum heading into a difficult month. Hamas had assumed that their various allies and proxies would join them in their violent campaign against Israel. But here was a major repudiation of their worldview. People wanted to live in peace; and Hezbollah, specifically, had made its own arrangement toward that end. We were ready to take this hard-earned achievement and bring it up to the next level, in the quest for a durable peace for the Middle East.

Other parts of the world were also beckoning. For a long time I had wanted to go to Africa. I thought it was important to convey American respect for an enormous continent—and all the more so because of Donald Trump's repeated and vulgar dismissal of African nations. Africa is expected to be the most populous continent in the world by 2050, with a quarter of the earth's population. It is profoundly connected to American history, as the ancestral homeland of millions of Americans. It will be an important place of investment and innovation in the years ahead, as the Chinese know very well.



9780316598484_PromiseMeAmerica_int_1P.indd 373 7/17/26 1:51 PM

For decades, they have been planting seeds there, much as they were doing in South America. When I hosted African leaders at a summit in December 2022, I promised that I would come to see them; now it was time to honor that promise.[21]

The trip was ambitious — a long way to go, for a relatively short visit — but it was a spectacular success. On December 2, I left Washington en route to Luanda, the capital of Angola — a country that nearly twelve million Americans trace their lineage to.

On December 3, I delivered a major speech on the history of Africa and the United States. Naturally, this included the painful topic of slavery, which I wanted to address head-on. Accordingly, we arranged for the speech to be delivered at Angola's National Museum of Slavery. At a time when right-wing critics were suggesting that our schools should pay less attention to slavery, I wanted to argue, much as I had in Tulsa early in my presidency, that a confident nation can handle this kind of honest self-examination. Indeed, it *must*.

As I prepared to make the speech, it was raining so hard that the raindrops almost appeared to be moving sideways. Then, as I reached the podium, the skies cleared and a rainbow emerged, a nice backdrop for my words: "It's our duty to face our history — the good, the bad, and the ugly, the whole truth. That's what great nations do.[22]

I followed that thought the next day with an address on the future of US-African cooperation. It was no secret that China had developed extensive trading relationships with Africa. China surpassed the United States as Africa's largest trade partner in 2009 and was extending its lead. More than fifty African nations had signed up with the Belt and Road Initiative. As a result of these partnerships, China had ever-greater access to Africa's mineral riches, including 72 percent of the cobalt and copper mines of the Democratic Republic of the Congo.

I wanted to counter China's influence, so the United States, along with the European Union, signed an agreement in October 2023 to



9780316598484_PromiseMeAmerica_int_1P.indd 374 7/17/26 1:51 PM

support African development. By renovating old railways and building new ones, we were able to construct a vital new eight-hundred-mile transportation network — the Lobito Corridor — that would ship minerals from the mineral-rich regions of Zambia and the DROC toward the Atlantic. In August 2024, less than a year after the agreement, the first container ship left Lobito with a copper shipment that would travel along the new route.[23]

We celebrated the Lobito Corridor with an event the day after my address on slavery. As a train guy, I was excited about one of the largest railroad-building projects in recent memory, one that would bring many other benefits to Angola as it was built. African minerals would also help the transition to clean energy, but some good old American technology was involved too (I loved that new steel bridges were coming from Scranton).[24] The presidents of the Democratic Republic of Congo and Zambia were there for the rollout, as was Tanzania's vice president. We had written an exciting new chapter for the history books.[25]

## DECEMBER

As we pushed deeper into December, I had a sense that the pace of history was accelerating. On December 8, the world received the stunning news that the Assad regime was collapsing in Syria. For decades, the Assads had ruled Syria with a heavy hand. Hafez al-Assad had seized power in 1970; upon his death in 2000, his son Bashar took over. That meant the Syrian people had suffered for fifty-four years from a government that tortured its citizens, lavished spending on its cronies, and cultivated a personality cult around its ruling family.

Despite what seemed like an iron grip, Assad's regime fell apart in a matter of days. After Islamist rebel factions seized Aleppo and Idlib, the vaunted Syrian army collapsed. The Assads fled to a gilded exile in Moscow, supported by their only friend, Vladimir Putin. This



9780316598484_PromiseMeAmerica_int_1P.indd 375 7/17/26 1:51 PM

was another setback to Putin's idea of a Russian order based on anti-democratic values. I was not sorry for his loss.[26]

It would take time to see what Syria's new leaders would say and do. But in the short term, this was a breath of fresh air, and change in the right direction for the Middle East. In addition to weakening Russia's capacities in the region, it would disrupt the Iran-Syria-Hezbollah alliance that had wreaked so much damage over the years.[27]

While we were digesting the Syrian news, we were getting closer to a cease-fire in Gaza. Our negotiators were hard at work, trying to propose language that was acceptable to both Israel and Hamas, who could barely agree on the most mundane principles. It was not clear at first how Syria's collapse would affect this process, but at a minimum, it conveyed the message that time was of the essence.

Two days later, on December 10, I went to the Brookings Institution to give a speech on the economy. This was the first of a series of valedictories I would give over the next few weeks, and I used the opportunity to review our remarkable progress. I rejoiced in one achievement in particular — that we had created more than sixteen million jobs, the most ever in any single presidential term. Donald Trump liked to run down our economic achievement, but in fact, he was inheriting an economy so good that *Time* called it "the strongest economy in modern history, which is the envy of the world." As Ronald Reagan liked to say, "Facts are stubborn things."[28]

We were now officially in the holiday season, and that was always special at the White House. In December 2024, our theme was "A Season of Peace and Light," and that felt appropriate as we worked tirelessly toward a cease-fire in the Holy Land.

As the end of my life in public office was coming into view, I found myself reflecting on its beginnings. On December 11, we had an event in the East Room for the Special Olympics, chaired by Tim Shriver. In my welcoming remarks, I went off script, remembering all the help that the Kennedy family had given me fifty-two years earlier, in December 1972, in the aftermath of the accident that took my wife



9780316598484_PromiseMeAmerica_int_1P.indd 376 7/17/26 1:51 PM

and daughter from me.[29] Perhaps it was because it was the same time of year; or perhaps it was the knowledge that my time in office was fleeting. I wanted to thank the people who had given me the strength to keep going.

My mind was also on my friend and Tim's aunt, Ethel Kennedy, who had died in October, and whose eulogy I had delivered in the Cathedral of St. Matthew the Apostle, the same place where the funeral Mass for her brother-in-law John F. Kennedy was held, and where I had attended Mass the day I became president.[30] I'm not sure I could have survived my tragedies if it were not for Ethel, who bucked me up by her intervention and her example, having survived tragedies of her own, and I got a little choked up. It was a special night with the Special Olympics.[31] There was magic in the White House on evenings like this.

A great deal remained in flux as we neared the finish line. I was worried about Ukraine. They had heroically stood up to Putin's aggression, but now they would be asking for aid from a man who had shown a bizarre and unceasing deference to Putin. During the transition, Donald Trump's team had asked me to sign a letter empowering them to negotiate directly with Putin, even before he took office. But I refused, unwilling to give them a carte blanche for what I expected would be a kind of surrender, at Ukraine's expense.[32]

There were sources of joy as well. We had quite a day on January 4, when I awarded nineteen Presidential Medals of Freedom, the highest US civilian honor. It was a festive event — how could it not be, when Magic Johnson was one of the honorees? But I was also sending a message of confidence in an America where people from both parties came together to take care of the people's business without rancor, and to celebrate the best of the United States.

Among the honorees were Hillary Clinton and three deceased heroes from the 1960s: Fannie Lou Hamer, a stalwart of the civil rights movement, George Romney, a champion of moderate Republicanism and a civil rights advocate, and Robert F. Kennedy, who, of course,



9780316598484_PromiseMeAmerica_int_1P.indd 377 7/17/26 1:51 PM

had always been a kind of lodestar for me. We also honored, among others, science educator Bill Nye, philanthropist David Rubenstein, *Vogue* editor Anna Wintour, and actors Denzel Washington and Michael J. Fox. I felt like I was speaking to the country at large when I said, "As my mother would say, we've got to keep the faith."[33]

For the fourth anniversary of January 6, I wrote an essay for *The Washington Post* urging Americans to remember that dark day. It was once again the day that a joint session of Congress met to certify the results of an election. Unlike four years earlier, there were no disruptions. In fact, the presiding official was the same person who had lost the race — Vice President Kamala Harris. She supervised the proceedings with grace — as I knew she would.[34]

## LOS ANGELES

Later that day, I flew to New Orleans to attend a prayer service, five days after a terror attack on Bourbon Street in which fourteen people had been killed. Then I kept going west, to Los Angeles, so that we could announce new climate measures.

When I arrived in Los Angeles, I announced that I was banning drilling for oil along most of our Atlantic and Pacific coastlines, the eastern Gulf of Mexico, and the northern Bering Sea in Alaska. It was a sweeping ban and I was excited to do it. It would improve the lives of future generations — including our first great-grandchild, born days later to our granddaughter Naomi, right there in LA.[35]

The next day, January 7, I was going to announce more measures for climate and conservation. Specifically, I was designating two huge new protected national monuments, the Chuckwalla National Monument (624,000 acres) and the Sáttítla Highlands National Monument (224,000 acres), both in California. This would be the capstone to years of conservation efforts. Even though my administration was limited to a single term, we protected an astonishing 674 million acres



9780316598484_PromiseMeAmerica_int_1P.indd 378 7/17/26 1:51 PM

of land and water — more than any president in history. I consider it one of my proudest achievements, and I owe a debt of gratitude for the hard work of my climate team.[36]

On the day of the announcement, the sky began to darken as a fire spread through the landscape around Los Angeles, accelerated by the drier-than-usual conditions. As we were getting in the motorcade to travel to the site for the announcement, a White House military aide presented us with a sobering piece of news: The Secret Service and the Military Office had determined that it was not safe for us to fly, given concerns about nearby fires.[37]

This, of course, was the beginning of the great conflagration that raged for twenty-four days, until January 31, and destroyed an enormous swath of the city, including large sections of Pacific Palisades and Altadena. More than sixteen thousand structures were destroyed.[38]

Over the next few weeks, even as people were cleaning out their desks in the White House, we worked hard to provide support to local responders and coordinate with local officials to get people the help they needed. As is so often the case, the catastrophe affected people from all walks of life, indiscriminately — Democrats, Republicans, working families, the wealthy. It was an equal-opportunity disaster, and the fires demanded a great deal of attention at a time when I was racing around the clock to lock in our achievements.

One specific disappointment was quickly apparent: I had hoped to fly overseas one last time, to present the Presidential Medal of Freedom to Pope Francis. I had long admired him for his wisdom and compassion, and I wanted to thank him on behalf of a grateful nation. When the gravity of the situation in LA became clear, I had to cancel the trip. Instead, I had the apostolic nuncio, the Vatican's emissary to the United States, come to the White House so that, with Pope Francis on the phone, I could read the citation and present the medal. It was a lovely moment, but I was sorry to miss one last consultation with a great moral leader who had become a friend.[39]



9780316598484_PromiseMeAmerica_int_1P.indd 379 7/17/26 1:51 PM

## JIMMY CARTER

There was another moral leader who was much on my mind at that time. The thirty-ninth president, Jimmy Carter, had died on December 29, and a major funeral in Washington National Cathedral was planned for January 9. Given Carter's modesty, it was strange to send him off in such a grand setting. But the majesty of the presidency demanded a respectful tribute, and I was honored to preside over the ceremony — one of my last public events as president.

I had grown close to Jimmy over the years. We were both in a tiny category of presidents named after their father (including Theodore Roosevelt), and I was as proud of my "Jr." as he was. I first met him in 1974, when he was still governor and I was a raw first-term senator, barely in my thirties. I was so young that he felt a little uncomfortable. As he later told an interviewer, "I felt a little ill at ease. I thought that Joe should have been talking to my children instead of to me."[40] But he didn't object when I became the first United States senator to endorse him when he ran his improbable, brilliant outsider campaign in 1976. Naturally, he appreciated that, and over the years, we grew ever tighter.

With President Carter, much as in my eulogy of John McCain in 2018, I felt as if I were also eulogizing a type of decency and modesty that was falling out of favor.

I admired the man Jimmy Carter was before the presidency: husband, father, naval officer, farmer, businessman, governor. The man he was during the presidency, when he restored respect to an office that had been dented during Watergate and Vietnam. And perhaps most of all, the man he became after the presidency, when he created the Carter Center and began a campaign of good works around the world. He rolled up his sleeves and got down to it, helping folks by building homes, digging wells, getting to know people where they lived. There was something beautiful about seeing a former president getting his



9780316598484_PromiseMeAmerica_int_1P.indd 380 7/17/26 1:51 PM

hands dirty like that. I don't think any president did more, in the words of Micah 6:8, to "walk humbly." He promised to always tell us the truth, and as far as I could tell, he kept that promise.

Jimmy and I stayed in touch throughout my years as the chair of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, then as vice president, and finally when I was elected to his old job. It was disorienting when all of a sudden "Mr. President" meant that he was talking to me, instead of the other way around. But we laughed about it, and he remained a valuable counselor to me until the end of his days. I called him on the night before my inauguration (he was too infirm to attend, but I wanted him to feel included). On my one hundredth day in office, I flew to Plains to check in with him.[41] When his beloved wife, Rosalynn, died, on November 19, 2023, I went to be there for Jimmy, and to honor the love and partnership that had sustained my friend for so many years.

Near the end of the ceremony for Rosalynn, I was told that Jimmy wanted to talk to me in a small room, inside the church. Of course I accepted, flattered. We greeted each other, sat down, and then he surprised me by saying, point-blank, "I love you." Without batting an eye, I replied, "I love you too." I've been fortunate to know a few tough old navy buzzards — John McCain as well as Jimmy — and when they say something that mushy, you better believe that they mean it. I was profoundly moved.

It was hard to avoid a sense that an era was ending — an era defined by hard work, social justice, and a commitment to the old ideal of America as a single family — or to use an old word, a union. We owed so much to the generation that fought World War II, then came home and demanded that America's freedoms be extended to all citizens, from all races and religions. Many of them were quiet people — but when their country demanded extraordinary sacrifices, they showed up, and did the hard things that needed to be done. They lived their long lives with a quiet but implacable sense of honor.

Jimmy's life had ended, and it felt as if his world had too. Two days before the funeral, on January 7, Meta announced that it was ending its policy of fact checking, meaning that falsehoods would further proliferate on its platform.[42] Jimmy had always stood for a principled foreign policy and taken pride in the fact that the United States had started no wars, invaded no countries, initiated no bombing campaigns on his watch. On January 8, the day before the funeral, Donald Trump gave a press conference at Mar-a-Lago, threatening to make Canada the fifty-first state, seize Greenland, rename the Gulf of Mexico, and take back Panama.[43]

The day after the funeral, January 10, Donald Trump was obligated to appear virtually, on a sixty-inch screen, for his sentencing in a New York courtroom, after being found guilty, by a jury of his peers, on thirty-four counts of falsifying financial records to cover up a sex scandal. He was given a lenient sentence — an unconditional discharge — by Judge Juan Merchan, in recognition of the fact that Trump was about to occupy the presidency. Still, it was a remarkable first — our first felon to serve in the White House.[44]

Four days later, on January 14, the Justice Department released a report describing its final conclusions relating to the riot on January 6, 2021. The 137 pages presented compelling testimony that Donald Trump was responsible for the damage to the Capitol — and, by extension, to our Constitution. With no evidence of electoral fraud, he had demanded that his supporters use violence to keep him in power. The report went into painstaking detail concerning the trauma experienced by Capitol Police. But it stopped short of recommending prosecution, because of the unique circumstance that the man accused of these crimes had been elected to another term. Still, the prosecutor, Jack Smith, concluded that the prosecution would have succeeded in a court of law if the 2024 election had not shifted the ground and rendered the idea of a conviction impossible. As he wrote: "Indeed, but for Mr. Trump's election and



9780316598484_PromiseMeAmerica_int_1P.indd 382 7/17/26 1:51 PM

imminent return to the Presidency, the Office assessed that the admissible evidence was sufficient to obtain and sustain a conviction at trial."[45]

In other words, our most sacred democratic ritual — the election of a president — had saved him from prosecution for his attack on the same ritual, four years earlier.

## THE LONG GOODBYE

Time was running short, and I had a lot of people to thank. There are so many people who make a presidency work, and I wanted to let all of them know how much I appreciated their service.

On January 13, I went to the Department of State to celebrate twenty years of friendship with my secretary of state, Tony Blinken, and to thank the men and women of the foreign service. We had come a long way in four years. In January 2021, we were hardly in a position to lead the world, with our democracy in shambles and our response to COVID lagging behind most other countries'.

Four years later, that underperformance was a distant memory. We had healed, in every sense. We had beaten COVID. We had stood up for democracy in Ukraine and completely rebuilt NATO, with two new members and far greater financial support from Europe (twenty-three nations were now paying 2 percent of GDP, compared to only nine nations in 2021). We had forged a creative Asia diplomacy that reclaimed the American advantage over China. The global economy was humming. And I had ended a war in Afghanistan that had gone on for two decades, sapping America's strength.

As I said at State:

> The United States is winning the worldwide competition. Compared to four years ago, America is stronger, our alliances are stronger, our adversaries and competitors are

> weaker, and we have not gone to war to make these things happen.[46]

No president should ever slow down too much to read what the pundits are saying, but I appreciated that foreign policy experts had largely grasped our achievement. In *Foreign Affairs*, Jessica Mathews praised the "Biden Doctrine" (which she defined as the effective leadership of the United States through reinvigorated alliances):

> He has won back the trust of friends and allies, built and begun to institutionalize a deep American presence in Asia, restored the United States' role in essential multilateral organizations and agreements, and ended the longest of the country's "forever wars" — a step none of his three predecessors had the courage to take... Despite the symptoms of debilitating political polarization at home, Biden has made profound changes in foreign policy — not to accommodate American decline but to reflect the country's inherent strength.[47]

Two days after my speech at State, on January 15, I wanted to use an Oval Office address to say farewell to the nation at large. That was a tradition dating back to George Washington, who understood instinctively that a few wise words from an outgoing president would be another way to strengthen democracy. It's nowhere written in the Constitution, but it's one of those customs — embedded in our respect for one another — that allow our system to stay strong.

In my reading of earlier farewell addresses, I could see a thread that ran through them: reminding Americans how much we can do if we work together, and if we guard against internal divisions. George Washington warned against partisan discord and the "spirit of revenge." In various ways, other presidents had adopted the theme. Harry Truman and Jimmy Carter gave thoughtful farewell



9780316508484_PromiseMeAmerica_int_1P.indd 384 7/17/26 1:51 PM

addresses reflecting on important issues of their times — in Truman's case, the wrenching decision to drop the atomic bomb, and in Carter's, the dawning awareness of the need to "see our earth as it really is — a small and fragile and beautiful blue globe, the only home we have."[48]

But the most memorable farewell in modern history was that delivered by Dwight D. Eisenhower, three days before John F. Kennedy was inaugurated. Eisenhower, of course, came to the presidency from his illustrious career as a general, and the planner of the greatest military landing in history, D-Day. His sense of patriotism was so profound that he used his farewell address to warn Americans against the same part of the government that he came from. Specifically, he warned against the "unwarranted influence" of a growing "military-industrial complex," developing ever-more powerful weapons in a way that was threatening to the budget, to democracy, and to the safety of the world.[49]

I admired Eisenhower for his candor and wanted to bring a similarly clear-eyed approach to my farewell. I, too, wanted to issue a warning, after taking care of some business. First, I wanted to thank the American people for the privilege they had conferred upon me by electing me, and by supporting me during the most difficult presidential transition since Lincoln. But I also had significant news to announce. After months of secret negotiations, we had pulled off what seemed impossible for most of the previous year, and secured a cease-fire and hostage deal between Hamas and Israel.[50]

Most presidents devote a farewell address to a defense of their record. I was more interested in following in Eisenhower's footsteps and alerting Americans to the dangers I could see hiding in plain sight. As I said:

> Americans are being buried under an avalanche of misinformation and disinformation enabling the abuse of power.[51]



9780316598484_PromiseMeAmerica_int_1P.indd 385 7/17/26 1:51 PM

Like Eisenhower, I wanted to name the danger. I felt that a concentration of forces was tilting the balance away from democracy and more toward a government of the very wealthy. "Oligarchy" was the word the ancient Greeks used to describe "government by the few" instead of "government by the many," which is much closer to the American ideal and to our motto, "E pluribus unum." It was a good word, and I used it to warn against an emerging "tech-industrial complex" of billionaires controlling social media, refusing to pay their fair share of taxes, and eroding our sense of unity and common purpose. As I put it:

> Today, an oligarchy is taking shape in America of extreme wealth, power, and influence that literally threatens our entire democracy, our basic rights and freedoms and a fair shot for everyone to get ahead.[52]

I closed, as most presidents do, with a few words of thanks to my bosses:

> My eternal thanks to you, the American people. After fifty years of public service, I give you my word, I still believe in the idea for which this nation stands — a nation where the strength of our institutions and the character of our people matter and must endure. Now it's your turn to stand guard. May you all be the keeper of the flame.

---

There were still a few more goodbyes, reflecting all the constituencies involved in a presidency. One of the most touching was my farewell to my military team. The day after my televised farewell address, I went to Joint Base Myer-Henderson Hall, near the Pentagon, to give thanks to the secretary of defense, Lloyd Austin, the chair of the Joint Chiefs,



9780316598484_PromiseMeAmerica_int_1P.indd 386 7/17/26 1:51 PM

General Charles Q. Brown Jr., and the men and women in uniform who do so much to protect Americans from an eternally dangerous world. As I put it, 1 percent of our population defends the other 99 percent — that's a lot to be grateful for. I tried to be specific in my remarks, thanking them for their heroism in ending America's longest war, in Afghanistan, and all that they had done to sustain Ukraine, brilliantly, after it was invaded by a much more powerful adversary. I was among friends, so I put it colloquially: "On America's watch, dictators do not get to do whatever the hell they want."[53]

That got a laugh — but it was hard to hold back tears, later in the speech, when I thanked all the medical staff who care for our veterans. I closed by thanking them for their oath to the Constitution — the enduring values that our warriors do so much to uphold.

## A FINAL DASH

I don't think any of us got much sleep in the last seventy-two hours of my administration. It was not simply that we were trying to complete the work that we had come in to do, and to say goodbye to colleagues with whom we had worked so closely over the past four years. We were also trying to protect the progress we'd made from the strong likelihood that Donald Trump would undo as much of it as he could, through executive actions.

I was particularly worried about all the people who had called out his corruption, or who had bravely resisted his policies when they were clearly going to harm Americans, as had been the case during the COVID pandemic. With that concern in mind, I had long conversations with my senior staff about what I might do to protect these people. Dr. Anthony Fauci, for example, was as selfless a public servant as I could think of, but he had run afoul of MAGA simply because COVID had undermined Trump's aura of power.

So I decided to offer Dr. Fauci a preemptive pardon, and to extend similar protections to others who had stood up against Donald



9780316598484_PromiseMeAmerica_int_1P.indd 387 7/17/26 1:51 PM

Trump in his first term. That included the members of Congress who had investigated January 6, including a brave Republican representative, Liz Cheney, and all the staffers who had worked on their report.

I also issued a pardon for General Mark Milley — it felt absurd to pardon someone so highly decorated, who had clearly done nothing wrong. But General Milley had expressed regret for marching in uniform alongside Trump when the president was trying to clamp down on the George Floyd protests in 2020 — and that made him a target for retaliation. Naturally, I was concerned about my family as well, since Trump targeted me in almost every speech that he gave, and threw around the word "retribution" at every opportunity. So I issued another series of preemptive pardons for the family members I thought he might come after.[54]

This was something that cost me many nights' sleep. In the normal course of events, none of these pardons would or should have been remotely necessary. People who are doing their jobs, serving their country, obeying the law deserve to be celebrated, not targeted. People who have made no choice to be in the public sphere, but happen to be related to those who have, should not be pawns in a power game. I regret that my decision felt necessary. I hope similar decisions are unnecessary in the future.

There were many other acts of clemency in the final days. I pardoned a figure from American history, Marcus Garvey, an early civil rights advocate who, in a politically motivated trial, had been convicted of mail fraud. Garvey was a hero to millions of African Americans; Martin Luther King Jr. called him "the first man, on a mass scale," to give millions of African Americans "a sense of dignity and destiny."[55] I also commuted the sentences of nearly 2,500 Americans serving disproportionately long prison terms for nonviolent drug offenses. And I commuted the sentences of thirty-seven federal prisoners on death row. All told, these various acts of clemency added up to the largest number granted by any president in our history.[56]



9780316598484_PromiseMeAmerica_int_1P.indd 388 7/17/26 1:51 PM

9780316598484_PromiseMeAmerica_int_1P.indd 388 7/17/26 1:51 PM



January 19, my last full day in the White House, was a whirlwind of activity. Among other things, it was the day the Gaza cease-fire went into effect, four days after I announced it in my farewell address. Given how difficult it had been to negotiate, my team and I needed to pay constant attention to a very fluid situation. That meant frequent calls to both sides and to the Qatari intermediaries who had helped move the conversation forward. Up to the last minute, we were not entirely sure it would work. The cease-fire was a complex agreement that would begin with the release of thirty-three of the ninety-eight remaining hostages (primarily women, children, and the elderly). Israeli forces would pull back from populated areas of Gaza and allow aid and supplies. It would be an understatement to say that tensions were high, but we pressed through, once again driving toward the finish line. We also consulted extensively with the incoming Trump team, a responsibility we took seriously.[57]

It had been a dizzying four months in the Middle East, and the Hezbollah-Israel cease-fire in November had opened up dramatic new possibilities. The situation remained tense, but both sides were cooperating. The cease-fire was holding. Hamas was releasing hostages, and Israel was releasing Palestinian prisoners. I remembered an old line that my friend George Mitchell had once applied to his brilliant diplomacy in Northern Ireland. Modestly, he summarized his achievement as "seven hundred days of failure and one day of success."[58]

That's how we felt. We had been working for 470 days, since the Hamas attack of October 7, 2023, and the mood was euphoric. I thanked my team profusely and quoted from Matthew 5:9: "Blessed are the peacemakers."[59]

But there were still a few hours left, and I wanted to thank some very special people. I flew to Charleston to acknowledge Jim Clyburn and all the South Carolinians who had been there for me at the beginning.

This, too, felt like a homecoming, like my November visit to Scranton had. The mood was jubilant. There was a lot of history in the air — not only because my four years in office were ending but because of deeper echoes, audible everywhere I went in Charleston. Dr. King was on my mind — it was the eve of the holiday in his name. But also, it was only five weeks since I had stood at a memorial to slavery in Angola and contemplated the horrors of the slave trade. Now I was on the other side of the Atlantic, in a city connected to Angola — because so many Angolans had been brought here. I had a powerful feeling of symmetry, and profound admiration for their descendants, who had survived the most painful degradations and come out on the other side with extraordinary strength and grace. We celebrated that survival with two events, a brief visit to Royal Missionary Baptist Church, and then a drop-by at Charleston's International African American Museum. I spoke in both places and closed my remarks with a bit of scripture (it was Sunday, after all). In Psalm 37:25, I found the perfect passage: "I have been young and now am old; yet I have not seen the righteous forsaken."

There was something reaffirming about these visits, that gave me strength for the final hours of my presidency. I flew back that night and gathered my thoughts for the next day. Only a few more steps to the finish line.[60]

## JANUARY 20

On Monday, January 20, I came down early to the Oval Office, ready for one more round of farewells. There were a few tears shed, but also an impressive air of bustling efficiency as my team attended to all the details of the transition.

I was confident that I had done everything I could to hand off a country in better shape than I had found it in four years earlier. America was delivering for its citizens and admired around the world. Another quarter million jobs had been created in the last month, adding to our



9780316598484_PromiseMeAmerica_int_1P.indd 390 7/17/26 1:51 PM

total of sixteen million.[61] We had not only recovered from COVID; we had rebuilt the economy in a way that was vastly more inclusive. We had protected the climate and invested in new technologies. We had defended democracy at home and around the world. On this Martin Luther King Jr. Day, I could say truthfully that I had done my best to build an administration that looked like America.[62]

In accordance with tradition, Jill and I welcomed Donald and Melania Trump back to the White House with a tea. I also left a letter to him in the Oval Office.

> Dear President Trump,
>
> As I take leave of this sacred office I wish you and your family all the best in the next four years. The American people—and people around the world—look to this house for steadiness in the inevitable storms of history, and my prayer is that the coming years will be a time of prosperity, peace, and grace for our nation.
>
> May God bless you and guide you as He has blessed and guided our beloved country since our founding.
>
> Joe Biden[63]

From the White House, we all headed over to the Capitol for the inauguration, which had been moved indoors because of the cold. Rather than offer a point-by-point rebuttal of his address, I prefer to share some reassuring lines I found myself thinking of, lines that Abraham Lincoln had once written in an inaugural address of his own: "While the people retain their virtue and vigilance no Administration by any extreme of wickedness or folly can very seriously injure the Government in the short space of four years."[64] By that, he meant simply that no president can screw up too badly, because of the brevity of his term.

I hoped that Lincoln was right. But I was worried that Dr. King was closer to the truth. In his final speech, he said, "The nation is sick.



9780316598484_PromiseMeAmerica_int_1P.indd 391 7/17/26 1:51 PM

Trouble is in the land." But then he added a consoling thought: "Only when it is dark enough can you see the stars."[65]

---

Shortly after I became president-elect, I wrote a letter to the people of Delaware, which was published in the Delaware *News Journal*. I wrote about the fact that it was Delaware that provided my father — and through him, my family — a place to rebuild after work in Scranton dried up.

I wrote about how my children had grown up knocking on the doors of Delawareans, learning that politics is, at the end of the day, about people. About making it easier for them to build a better life. About respecting one another because, in a small state, you know you're going to run into one another at the grocery store, or church, or the Little League game.

I wrote about bringing that approach to the White House, as a proud Democrat, yes, but also as an American president, devoted to working as hard for those who did not vote for me as for those who did.

Now, as I reflected on my service, I took some satisfaction in having upheld that pledge.

On January 15, as I prepared to leave office, I sat down to write another letter to the people of Delaware, and again was grateful to the Delaware *News Journal* for publishing it:

> I once saw a greeting card that read: "Home is where you start." That's a pretty simple statement, and also, a pretty profound thought. Home is the place where the tracks of your character and the DNA of your value system are laid down — it's the place that surrounds you and protects you.
>
> It's an incubator: through its windows you get a glimpse of the world before you have to step out into it —



9780316598484_PromiseMeAmerica_int_1P.indd 392 7/17/26 1:51 PM

you can see The Possibilities — and when you are ready — when it is time, you walk out its door into that world — to become all you can be — all you are capable of.

Delaware is home. And now for the final time, Jill and I, nurtured and chiseled by the State, have come home to stay — with gratitude and love for the opportunities you have given us to listen, to learn, and to lead.

You celebrated with me in 1972 when I was elected to the US Senate at 29 years old — you mourned with me 6 weeks later at the death of my wife and baby daughter. Your grief washed over me and helped heal my soul — and 5 years later, your joy at my marriage to Jill sealed my heart.

You marched with me in parades from Hockessin to Laurel, you ate with me at the Italian and Greek festivals, manned the booth with me at the Harrington Fair — stood beside me when I was bent but not broken, stood behind me when I needed that extra push of courage, stood in front of me when I needed to listen and follow your wisdom…

…So Delaware, from the bottom of my heart, thank you, thank you, thank you. It has been the privilege of my life to represent you, as a County Councilman, US Senator, Vice President of the United States and President of the United States.

In my first letter, I had shared some words attributed to James Joyce: "When I die, Dublin will be written on my heart." I returned to him here:

Because of you, Delaware will forever be written on my heart.

I'll see you back home.



9780316598484_PromiseMeAmerica_int_1P.indd 393 7/17/26 1:51 PM

Such is the efficiency of the transition that I was whisked away within minutes of the inaugural address. Jill and I were treated to a final helicopter ride in a helicopter that was no longer Marine One, as I was no longer the president. We took a slow, looping turn over the White House and then circled the monuments, lingering especially over the Lincoln Memorial. We then turned toward the southeast and Joint Base Andrews. I craned my neck to look back at a Capitol in which I'd served for thirty-six years. A White House for twelve. A city that was never quite home, but one that I came to day after day, and year after year, and job after job because I felt it was where I could make the greatest difference.

At Andrews, we had an emotional farewell event with our White House team before we boarded a plane to California. We were headed to be with our great-grandson, and to celebrate this young life, one that will, God willing, extend into the twenty-second century.[66]



9780316598484_PromiseMeAmerica_int_1P.indd 394 7/17/26 1:51 PM

EPILOGUE

# THE POWER OF OUR EXAMPLE

My first visit to the Syracuse University campus took place in 1965. I knew I was interested in law school, and Syracuse was close to where my girlfriend, Nelia Hunter — who would become my first wife — was teaching. Looking for the library, I wandered into the dean's office. One impromptu interview later, I was applying. Sixty-five years later, I was back at my alma mater to see my portrait being unveiled.

I had slogged through torts and contracts and struggled with property law, but in constitutional law I had found an avenue to fulfill the mantra ingrained in me by my parents: "Dignity, Joey. Respect, fairness, equity, equality. That's what America is all about."

As much as I enjoyed the various tributes, I particularly enjoyed hearing from Jeffrey Scruggs, the chair of Syracuse's board of trustees. He had grown up in the area, and described what my legislative victories meant for the community. As part of the CHIPS and Science Act, a major grant had gone to Micron Technology to build a $100



9780316598484_PromiseMeAmerica_int_1P.indd 395 7/17/26 1:51 PM

billion semiconductor complex in Clay, New York, just outside Syracuse. It was an investment that would increase America's security and global leadership and create tens of thousands of good jobs. Scruggs described an economic renaissance that this community had not seen for generations. He also noted my infrastructure law, which was taking down an aging highway that had divided the city and redesigning the city's roadways to create more green space, provide safer access for bikes and pedestrians, and reconnect neighborhoods. The legislative victories I had achieved in Washington were bearing fruit in cities and towns all across the country, and are continuing to.

Things had been coming full circle for me in other ways as well.

In April 2025, I made plans to travel to Rome for the funeral of His Holiness Pope Francis.

In Francis, I saw the revitalization of the faith I had grown up with. A faith that calls us to care for "the last and the least" among us. A faith that gives us the obligation to feed the hungry, care for the sick, lift up the poor, welcome the stranger. A faith that sees the humanity in everyone and believes we are all God's children. A faith of forgiveness and compassion. Of dignity and respect. Of love and mercy.

I believe in something that Franklin D. Roosevelt said in 1932: "The presidency is not merely an administrative office. That's the least of it. It is more than an engineering job, efficient or inefficient. It is preeminently a place of moral leadership."[1] In that work, I took inspiration from Pope Francis. Indeed, one of the mementos I most treasure from my time in public life is a photo I have of the two of us together. I kept it on my desk in the Oval Office, and it is now on my desk at home in Delaware. It serves as a daily reminder to me to do more, to be better, to make a difference in the lives of others.

I had been looking forward to attending the funeral, but the day I was supposed to travel, my flight fell through, and I resigned myself to watching it from home. At the last minute, my team arranged for another plane, and Jill and I had thirty minutes to dress and pack and

get out the door in order to make it. I was glad to be in the presence of 250,000 faithful in Rome to celebrate the life and grieve the loss of this profoundly honorable man.

In February 2026, I returned once again to South Carolina. This time, it was to celebrate the sixth anniversary of the primary victory that breathed life back into my campaign and set me on the path to the presidency. Indeed, I noted that South Carolina's state motto, *Dum spiro spero*, translates to "While I breathe, I hope." So many times, South Carolina had given me both breath and hope.

Among other friends, Jim Clyburn spoke that day. He talked about the promises we had kept, together. I was particularly moved when Jim pointed out that my presidency didn't just move the country forward; it also "reached back and got those of us who have not been treated fairly and brought us along."

We did a lot of good.

The journey to South Carolina provided another indication of how much my life had changed. I traveled there on a commercial flight, which caused a bit of a sensation. Several of my fellow passengers asked for my signature, or posted TikTok videos.

I actually invited the woman next to me to attend the event, and she did! Yes, I miss Air Force One — who wouldn't? The best part of it was that it wouldn't take off until I was aboard. Now I have to make the plane on time, and endure the delays and missed connections. But I am once again free, or freer, to mingle and interact with people. For the duration of my presidency, I was prevented from riding on Amtrak. Now I can walk the aisle of the train, reconnect with passengers and conductors I used to know, and meet new ones. Many people have written about how the presidency puts you in a bubble. I am happy to be outside that bubble. In Wilmington, I've resumed making runs to my favorite haunts, like the Charcoal Pit, a beloved local diner where it is always 1956. I'm pretty sure the price of a milkshake has gone up since then, but I can't tell for sure because they never let me pay for one.

I also reconnected with Nancy Pelosi, over lunch at an Italian restaurant. While I had seen Nancy and her family briefly at a couple of previous events, our last real conversation had been the one in which she told me that it was my decision whether to continue my run for president, making it clear what her decision was. We didn't discuss that episode. But we had been through too much together to allow a rift to go un-mended. And so we talked about life and family and politics and fell into the old rhythms of friendship. And I'm glad we did.

In May 2025, another aspect of my life came full circle as well, although not in a way that I would have hoped.

As vice president, I had launched an ambitious government effort to accelerate the rate of progress against cancer. We called it the Cancer Moonshot. As part of the Moonshot, we set up a blue-ribbon panel to provide guidance on the scientific priorities in our effort to end cancer as we know it. These priorities included investing in promising new therapies like immunotherapy, using the body's own immune system to target and kill cancer cells; enhancing prevention and detection efforts in every community, regardless of the zip code in which you live; supporting research to improve outcomes for children with cancer; and putting us on a path to turn what is currently a devastating cancer diagnosis into either a chronic disease or an absolute cure. Those efforts would of course require funding, and Congress delivered on that through the Twenty-First Century Cures Act, which was signed in the waning days of Barack Obama's presidency. That law provided seven years of new funding for cancer research in many areas, including studies on cancer disparities, new clinical trial networks to drive drug discovery, and innovative projects examining childhood cancer. The law streamlined cancer-related decision-making at the FDA through the formation of an Oncology Center of Excellence, so that effective treatments could be approved faster and patients could have more direct access to information about the regulatory process.

As president, I sought to reinvigorate that work. I took great hope in the fact that over the first twenty years of the twenty-first century,

the age-adjusted death rate from cancer has fallen by about 25 percent. To put it simply, as I often asked my staff to do, more people are surviving cancer and living longer after being diagnosed with cancer. That was enabled by progress on multiple fronts, including treatments that target specific mutations in many types of cancer, like certain types of lung cancer, leukemia, and skin cancers; immunotherapies, which are making a difference in skin cancers, blood cancers, and others; and cancer vaccines, like the HPV vaccine, which prevents the cause of up to seven kinds of cancer.

New scans and tests are helping detect cancers earlier, when the treatment options are better; and another factor, often forgotten, is the progress against tobacco use, which has led to reductions in many types of cancer.

The cancer work was something Jill and I threw our whole hearts into. Jill's advocacy for cancer education and prevention began in 1993, when four of her friends were diagnosed with breast cancer. After that year, she launched the Biden Breast Health Initiative to educate Delaware high school girls about the importance of cancer prevention. As first lady, she continued her work emphasizing early detection efforts and improving the patient, family, and caregiver experience with cancer. She also raised awareness about the importance of cancer screenings, especially those that people had put off or delayed because of the COVID pandemic.

The pace of progress was apparent when I became president, and it allowed me to set an ambitious goal: to reduce the death rate from cancer by at least 50 percent over the next twenty-five years, a process we are now five years into as of this writing. As president, I was proud to support biomedical and health research in my budgets. I also proposed a bold new vision for biomedical and health research in what I called the Advanced Research Projects Agency for Health (ARPA-H). The goal of this entity is to improve the US government's capabilities to speed research that can improve human health — to improve our ability to prevent, detect, and treat a range of diseases



9780316598484_PromiseMeAmerica_int_1P.indd 399 7/17/26 1:51 PM

including cancer, infectious diseases, Alzheimer's disease, and many others. Our government has long had a DARPA program — advanced research projects for defense. I thought it was long past time we had the same for health. Here, too, that work is starting to bear fruit. As of this writing, novel treatments for osteoarthritis pioneered by ARPA-H are on the horizon.

Every family is touched by cancer in some way, and so it's safe to say that for every doctor, scientist, clinician, researcher, educator, or lawmaker who works to fight cancer, that work is "personal." It was personal to me for too many reasons to count; friends and colleagues I had lost, and of course the courageous battle fought by Beau. And then on May 16, 2025, it became more personal than ever. I had been experiencing some urinary symptoms and went to get checked out. The doctors found a nodule on my prostate, which turned out to be an aggressive form of stage 4 prostate cancer that had metastasized to my bones.

My Gleason score is 9, which means it is fast-moving. I was lucky in that my particular cancer appears to be responsive to hormone therapy. There's a lot of evidence that even men of my age can live for ten years or more with this treatment. That's why we immediately started it. I began treatment at Penn Medicine with hormone therapy and radiation, and am grateful to the medical professionals who took such good care of me. (I've always maintained that the doctors allow you to live, but it's the nurses who make you want to live.) In October, I rang the bell to signal the conclusion of my treatment. Jill and I brought sandwiches from Capriotti's for the medical team, and flowers for my physician.

I have to say, when I heard the diagnosis, it hit me hard. It's one thing to imagine how hearing the word "cancer" will upend your world. It's another thing to actually hear it. Those are moments we realize we're all human. Even former presidents.

We decided to make my diagnosis public two days later, on May 18, 2025. Even though I was a private citizen. I did it partly because



9780316598484_PromiseMeAmerica_int_1P.indd 400 7/17/26 1:51 PM

I assumed the information would become public one way or another. But mostly I did it because I felt that it could be helpful in raising awareness. I was touched by the outpouring of love and support that came from all corners and all over the world. So Jill and I shared a follow-up tweet, a photo featuring us and our cat Willow, with a message paraphrasing Hemingway: "Cancer touches us all. Like so many of you, Jill and I have learned that we are strongest in the broken places. Thank you for lifting us up with love and support."[2]

What did surprise me was the cynical twist the story took in the political press and among political commentators. Almost immediately, the reaction was: "You hid it from us." "You must have known it." "You're lying." Let me tell you something: There isn't anyone in this world with stage 4 cancer who doesn't wish it had been caught sooner. For anyone to think I would try to ignore or hide a cancer ravaging my body is insane. Here are the simple facts. Standard medical protocol is to stop testing men for prostate cancer after the age of seventy. There are a lot of reasons for this; the most important is probably that prostate cancer becomes so common in men at that age, and most of those cancers are very slow growing. An estimated 70 percent of men, by the time they reach age seventy, have some cancer cells in the prostate. Most of them die from something else and never know about these cells.

Of course, people said, "You weren't just another older man. You were the president." Yes, I was. And as I sit here today, do I wish I had been tested sooner? Yes, I do. Do I wish the cancer had been caught before it spread to my bones? Yes, I do.

But I was treated no differently from any other eighty-two-year-old man in America. Maybe I should have been. But I wasn't. Now I have to play the cards I've been dealt. And all I can do — with the help of an incredible medical team and an even better family — is fight like hell. And that's what I'm doing.

As of this writing, I'm feeling good. That's the result of the work of so many people in so many disciplines. And I take some pride that I've



9780316598484_PromiseMeAmerica_int_1P.indd 401 7/17/26 1:51 PM

been able to contribute to it in some small way. In my many travels, I am gratified to hear so many people tell me about the ways in which their lives improved over my four years in office.

A lot of that is related to COVID, understandably, and the effort that went into defeating the pandemic and keeping the economy afloat. Sometimes, with a memory that painful, it's easier just to let go of it than dwell on it, and a lot of Americans were very happy to move on with their lives. That was exactly the goal we had in mind with our COVID efforts: getting America vaccinated, getting kids back to school, and getting people back to work allowed America to be itself again.

There are lots of other signs of how far we've come since then. It's not in my nature to dwell on the past; I've always been much more interested in figuring out the best path forward. In the daily grind of the White House, it could be difficult to step back and take the long view — because so much was happening every minute. But now, from my lake house, I am able to slow down and savor the results of my presidency.

Economically, we outperformed all expectations. We inherited a cratering economy and created 16.6 million jobs. My administration was the first in history that created jobs every single month. Unemployment hit historic lows in nearly every category — including for Black Americans, Latinos, women, veterans, workers without a college or high school diploma, and workers with disabilities. It felt like everything — and everyone — was working. The median household wealth rose by a stunning 37 percent.[3]

We built this prosperity while improving supply chains around the world, to make sure we would never have the kind of chronic shortages we saw during the pandemic. We created new kinds of manufacturing jobs, particularly around the manufacture of semiconductors. We encouraged the development of artificial intelligence, while also putting safeguards in place so that human beings would still be in charge. We invested prodigiously in new roads, train tracks,



9780316598484_PromiseMeAmerica_int_1P.indd 402 7/17/26 1:51 PM

bridges, and high-speed internet networks, connecting all of us to one another — especially in underserved areas.[4] In all of these ways, we built a more modern economy, and also, as I had committed, a fairer economy than the one we inherited. When I left office, Black prosperity was rising at the fastest rate in history. It was also a greener economy, especially after we invested massively in electric vehicles and charging stations, creating hundreds of thousands of union jobs. We didn't need to taunt our friends and neighbors, or impose tariffs.

We led with principle. We supported Ukraine, after Russia's invasion, because a friend needed us, and the survival of democracy was at stake in an important European country. We managed that difficult conflict — preventing Vladimir Putin's victory — while avoiding a wider war that would have required American troops. We also expanded NATO, adding Finland and Sweden, two stalwart allies with long experience of standing up to Russia. We ended the longest war in American history, in Afghanistan. In the Middle East, the loss of life was heartbreaking, but our diplomacy achieved historic cease-fires between Israel and its neighbors. As a result, American leadership was held in great respect. In my first year in office, global confidence in the United States rose from 17 percent to 75 percent.[5] It would remain high for all four years.

Of course I was worried about how to protect this progress. All presidents must confront a feeling that their legacy is vulnerable to the pendulum of politics and the whims of their successors. In my case, that feeling was magnified by the dismissive and destructive nature of Donald Trump, who seemed unable to tolerate the idea that someone else's accomplishments might be worth building on rather than tearing down.

I was worried from the moment I left Washington that our successful policies would be on the chopping block. On day one, Donald Trump reversed many of my decisions. I had rejoined the Paris Climate Accords on my first day in office; he canceled our participation, again, on his. That meant we were one of four countries outside the



9780316598484_PromiseMeAmerica_int_1P.indd 403 7/17/26 1:51 PM

treaty; the other three were Iran, Libya, and Yemen. That was not a great look to the rest of the world.[6]

After that, it was like a bonfire, as one climate measure after another went up in smoke. Other measures he signed that day included executive orders to open up public lands to drilling for oil, to end support for electric vehicles, and to cancel projects for wind and solar energy. Not only was that going to accelerate climate change, it would cripple our ability to compete with China in some of the biggest industries of the future. He announced these policies at a rally as, at a five-star hotel across from the White House, oil and gas executives sipped champagne and nibbled on Pop-Tarts emblazoned with Trump's image.[7]

He also pardoned nearly 1,600 insurrectionists who had been convicted for their violent acts on January 6, 2021. In the new regime, it was as if that terrible day had never happened at all. Indeed, that seemed to be the point. When a plaque was finally placed in the Capitol to honor the Capitol's defenders, it was installed at 4 a.m., with no ceremony.[8] That was an insult to the Capitol Police, and to all Americans who believe in the sanctity of our democratic elections.

In the days and weeks that followed, the damage deepened. As before, the lies kept coming. They began on his first day, with the utterly discredited claim that he had defeated me in 2020. They just gained momentum from then on, as Donald Trump took a wrecking ball to our traditions and institutions — at times literally, as when he tore down the East Wing of the White House (after promising he would not).[9]

It was clearly going to be a crueler government. We were the richest society in history, and considerably richer than we'd been four years earlier. But now it seemed like anyone who worked for the federal government in a job that helped the disenfranchised or the disabled or the needy was on the chopping block — especially after Elon Musk's so-called Department of Government Efficiency began to cut hundreds of thousands of jobs.



9780316598484_PromiseMeAmerica_int_1P.indd 404 7/17/26 1:51 PM

It was also going to be a government that stoked racial tensions instead of calming them. The new administration would launch a campaign to end the birthright citizenship protections of the Fourteenth Amendment to the Constitution, a proud legacy of the Civil War. ICE officers would comb American cities, using expanded police powers to round up Brown and Black people and detain them far from the courts and local police.[10]

We would be a less tolerant society, with raging conspiracy theories actively promoted by the White House and Donald Trump's constant and increasingly unhinged social media feed.

We would be a sicker society. MAGA anger over COVID meant that the government would drastically pull back its support for vaccines, leaving the country vulnerable to higher rates of measles and other diseases. We also withdrew from the World Health Organization, a decision that removed us from essential international coordination against disease outbreaks.[11] China immediately stepped up its funding of the WHO, earning the world's gratitude and turning our withdrawal to its own diplomatic advantage.

We would be a less democratic society, with a supine Congress, less balance between the branches of government, and an executive largely impervious to any guardrails, especially after the 2024 Supreme Court decision that ruled that presidents have immunity from prosecution for nearly any act that falls within their official duties. Democratic states would see their federal funding cut with no explanation. The administration would also try to gut newspapers, nonprofits, and civil society organizations — the lifeblood of democracy. It would do these things despite winning less than 50 percent of the popular vote in the 2024 election. Voting, too, would become more difficult, with threats of soldiers patrolling voting stations, and a constant drumbeat of false accusations about voting fraud.

We would be a more fearful society, looking over our shoulders at one another, worried about dropping our kids off at school, worried about going to the voting booth, nervous about government

surveillance and the increasing presence of masked government agents, heavily armed, in our streets. Franklin D. Roosevelt was wise to establish freedom from fear as a core human right.

And we would be increasingly on our own. I had worked constantly to strengthen our alliances, NATO above all but also AUKUS, the Quad, and the United States–Japan–South Korea friendship in the Indo-Pacific. They would all languish in a world of "America First." That would make us that much more vulnerable in any competition with China or Russia. To make matters worse, global confidence in the United States to do the right thing was once again plummeting. After years of principled diplomacy, at the head of the world's community of democracies, we were launching wars of aggression with incoherent and contradictory motives that alienated our allies and did nothing to promote the rule of law — quite the opposite.[12]

In all of these ways, I am troubled by my successor, and find myself asking: How can we reclaim our better angels?

A memoir is more about the past than the future, but I love my country and I want to end this book with a few thoughts about how we can get back on track, deepen our democracy, and earn back the world's trust.

It will surely take time; it may be the work of a generation or more. But we are not condemned to lives of blind acceptance. We are built for lives of purpose. We can reject efforts to define us and divide us by our differences. I believe in the young people I met throughout my four years in office. And I take heart from the knowledge that we have been in dark places before.

The phrase "better angels" comes from such a moment. Lincoln's first inaugural address may have struck some listeners as naive, calling on Americans to treat one another with more respect, when so much anger was in the air and seven states had already seceded (to be followed by four more). But Lincoln was right that rank-and-file citizens, from all walks of life, would stand up to defend a certain vision of their country against an alien project being imposed on them. That



9780316598484_PromiseMeAmerica_int_1P.indd 406 7/17/26 1:51 PM

included more than half a million immigrants, proud to serve their adopted country by enlisting in the Union Army. The result was a stronger republic that more truly lived up to the aspirations of the founders. As Americans, we are the beneficiaries of ten generations of principled leadership, going back to the founders who wrote the words we still live by. Our problems are formidable — but we already possess the skills needed to solve them. In my speeches, I have often said that we lead not just by the example of our power but by the power of our example. I have always believed in the idea of America — not just our talented people and our glorious land but in a certain generosity of spirit, easily found in our great documents.

The national epic begins with Jefferson's immortal language about rights and respect, embedded within the Declaration of Independence. It deepens with the legal protections afforded by the Bill of Rights, and the delicate balance between the branches outlined by the Constitution. These sentences are not random platitudes; they offer a precise blueprint for self-government, based on lifting people up, not keeping them down.

That vision drew strength over the centuries. Lincoln improved the blueprint, putting down a racist rebellion and opening up citizenship to all Americans. FDR improved it further, using the full powers of the state to fight poverty and depression, and to widen the field of opportunity. Many other presidents, Republicans and Democrats, built on these achievements and improved the blueprint again. Many non-presidents did the same, including someone who never ran for office, Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., and someone who died as he was seeking the presidency, Robert F. Kennedy. To bind our nation's wounds, as King and Kennedy tried to do, has always been foremost in my mind, even decades after their demise.

Of course, not all our presidents listened to their better angels. During the last Gilded Age, in the late nineteenth century, the presidency often seemed like a revolving door for politicians who presided over a party system that rewarded wealthy donors, embraced



9780316598484_PromiseMeAmerica_int_1P.indd 407 7/17/26 1:51 PM

corruption, and did little to constrain the brutal economic forces that were dividing haves and have-nots.

But history also offers a form of consolation, because we tend to use our crises constructively and build back better than before. The Civil War was followed by Reconstruction and a time—admittedly brief—of greater racial justice. The Gilded Age was followed by a period of vigorous progressivism, guided by principled Republicans as well as Democrats, and talented leaders at the state and local levels. The Great Depression led to the New Deal, which, by deepening democracy at home, allowed the United States to stand up for it around the world when it came time to defeat fascism. That immense struggle was followed, in turn, by an enlightened Pax Americana that has held for eighty-plus years. It is still going, although now gravely endangered by the Trump administration's disdain for alliances.

I prefer thinking about the future rather than the past, after a long career in public service doing just that. But I'm also mindful that 2026 is an important anniversary year for the United States, and I want to do my part to respect that. The 250th year since the Declaration—our semiquincentennial—brings a chance to assess every aspect of our "great experiment," as Washington called it.[13]

I like the word "experiment"; it suggests something that is unfinished, still in process. By almost any definition, we have succeeded beyond the wildest dreams of the founders, to become the greatest nation in the history of the world. But to bask in self-congratulation is too easy, and misses the point. Instead, we should seize the moment to ask hard questions of ourselves. What kind of country do we want to be in the years ahead? In 2076? Or 2126? Will we still be yelling at one another? By looking at ourselves realistically, we can find a healthier way forward.

A more constructive conversation in 2026 and the years to follow will mean less demonization of outsiders, or political rivals. And more finding common ground, the way the signers of the Declaration did. Common ground was elusive for them too. But they



9780316598484_PromiseMeAmerica_int_1P.indd 408 7/17/26 1:51 PM

persevered and overcame their differences. They came from many different backgrounds; cities and farms, northern states and southern states. Delaware was right in the middle, as always. It was a vote by the Delaware delegation — deadlocked until a late-arriving Caesar Rodney broke the tie — that made the fledgling nation's vote for independence unanimous.[14]

Can we find our way back to the national story, in a way that unites instead of divides us? Let's begin with the Declaration. Personally, I find that it still speaks to us. It not only creates a new country; it defines that country's characteristics. It will be infused with a radical decency — the phrase "a decent respect" appears near the beginning. It will promote local democracy — legislatures and courts — against a distant monarch who is trying to snuff them out. It will reject the idea of standing armies in cities, sent "to harass our people." It will oppose "cutting off our trade with all parts of the world." It will, in short, let people live their lives, at peace with one another, free to try, and perhaps to fail, but then to try again.

The Declaration concludes with a sentence that still speaks of that mutual respect so vital — and so necessary — for any democracy worthy of the name. As candidates, as voters, and as citizens, we must accept the setbacks that are inevitable in politics. We win some campaigns, and we lose others. But we must never relinquish our fundamental faith in the country, and in one another. Let's do all we can to get through 2026 and the years to come with a renewed confidence in ourselves, as a great people, still united.

The year 2026 began well for me, with a modest reunion of sorts. I attended a retirement party for a longtime Secret Service agent, Rob Walker. As the reception was ending, a woman came up to me and asked if she could show me a photo. It was the image I mentioned from my first day in office, five years earlier, on January 20, 2021.

That was the day a Delaware photographer snapped a shot of an unnamed soldier, saluting Beau's grave at the very moment I was becoming her commander-in-chief. And now she was telling me that

she was the soldier in the photograph. You can imagine my reaction (I had written that account, near the beginning of my book, well before meeting her). The words were hard to come by, at first, because I was so moved. But I managed to thank her for her kindness, and her service. We will stay in touch.

I cite that moment because her act of basic decency made such a difference to me, and I'd like to ask the readers of this book to commit an act of decency of their own, toward a fellow American. It doesn't matter to whom; it's all the more meaningful if the act of decency is toward a stranger, especially a stranger from a different background. As for the Declaration's ultimate sentence, I love it because it speaks of the sacred honor we give to one another, as fellow citizens in a project that is bigger than any of us. Specifically, it ends: "...with a firm reliance on the protection of divine Providence, we mutually pledge to each other our Lives, our Fortunes and our sacred Honor."

That's how I will always feel about the chance I was given to serve the American people, alongside so many talented men and women, equally dedicated to the success and survival of our democracy.

When I was a kid, whenever something bad would happen, I could count on my dad to say, "When you get knocked down, get up."

Until I'm counted out for the last time, I'll keep getting up. And America will too.



9780316598484_PromiseMeAmerica_int_1P.indd 410 7/17/26 1:51 PM

# NOTES

## CHAPTER ONE: HISTORY COMES KNOCKING

1. Nancy Pelosi, conversation with author, April 3, 2026
2. Bobby Allyn and Tamara Keith, "Twitter Permanently Suspends Trump, Citing 'Risk of Further Incitement of Violence,'" *All Things Considered*, NPR, January 8, 2021, https://www.npr.org/2021/01/08/954760928/twitter-bans-president-trump-citing-risk-of-further-incitement-of-violence.
3. "Annual Message to Congress—Concluding Remarks," Abraham Lincoln Online, 2020, https://www.abrahamlincolnonline.org/lincoln/speeches/congress.htm.
4. Antonia Noori Farzan, "As Biden Addressed the World, an Unknown Man in Uniform Stood over His Son Beau's Grave," *Washington Post*, January 21, 2021, https://www.washingtonpost.com/nation/2021/01/21/beau-biden-grave-inauguration/.

## CHAPTER TWO: A PROMISE KEPT

1. Sabrina Siddiqui and Tom McCarthy, "Joe Biden Announces 2020 Presidential Campaign," *Guardian*, April 25, 2019, https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2019/apr/25/joe-biden-presidential-campaign-2020-elections; "Speech: Joe Biden Publicly Launches His Campaign in Philadelphia, PA—May 18, 2019," *Roll Call*, Factbase Transcripts, 2026, https://rollcall.com/factbase/biden/transcript/joe-biden-speech-philadelphia-pennsylvania-may-18-2019/.
2. Glenn Kessler, Salvador Rizzo, and Meg Kelly, "Trump's False or Misleading Claims Total 30,573 over 4 Years," *Washington Post*, January 24, 2021, https://www.washingtonpost.com/politics/2021/01/24/trumps-false-or-misleading-claims-total-30573-over-four-years/.
3. Ken Hughes, "A Rough Guide to Richard Nixon's Conspiracy Theories," Miller Center, 2026, https://millercenter.org/the-presidency/educational-resources/a-rough-guide-to-richard-nixon-s-conspiracy-theories#Secret_Bombings.
4. Steven Brill, *The Death of Truth: How Social Media and the Internet Gave Snake Oil Salesmen and Demagogues the Weapons They Needed to Destroy Trust and Polarize the World—and What We Can Do About It* (Knopf, 2024), 5.
5. Brill, *The Death of Truth*, 5, 24–25, 98.
6. Kate Sullivan, "Security Guard Who Met Biden in Elevator Gives First Nominating Speech at Democratic Convention," CNN, August 18, 2020, https://www.cnn.com/2020/08/18/politics/security-guard-elevator-biden-convention; Michael M. Grynbaum, "A Security Guard's Meeting with Biden Went Viral. On Tuesday, She Helped Nominate Him," *New York Times*, August 18, 2020, https://www.nytimes.com/2020/08/18/us/politics/nyt-security-guard-joe-biden-nomination.html; Conrad Duncan, "Biden Selfie with Elevator Operator Goes Viral After 2020 Candidate Fails to Secure New York Times



9780316598484_PromiseMeAmerica_int_1P.indd 415 7/17/26 1:51 PM

Endorsement," *Independent* (UK), January 21, 2020, https://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/americas/us-politics/joe-biden-selfie-new-york-times-endorsement-2020-election-democrats-a9294986.html.

7. Joe Biden (@JoeBiden), "Jim Clyburn is a voice of powerful moral clarity that is heard loud and clear across this country—in our capital and beyond. He reminds us why we're in public service in the first place—and I'm proud to have his support," X, February 6, 2020, https://x.com/JoeBiden/status/1232683784954359808.
8. David Smith, "Why Congressman James Clyburn Was the Most Important Politician of 2020," *Guardian,* December 28, 2020, https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2020/dec/28/why-congressman-james-clyburn-was-the-most-important-politician-of-2020.
9. Carol Leonnig and Philip Rucker, *I Alone Can Fix It: Donald J. Trump's Catastrophic Final Year* (Penguin Press, 2021), 37.
10. "The Pandemic's True Death Toll," *Economist,* October 25, 2022, https://www.economist.com/graphic-detail/coronavirus-excess-deaths-estimates.
11. Leonnig and Rucker, *I Alone Can Fix It,* 37.
12. Elizabeth A. Fenn, *Pox Americana: The Great Smallpox Epidemic of 1775–82* (Hill and Wang, 2002), 94–95.
13. Kathryn Watson, "A Timeline of What Trump Has Said on Coronavirus," CBS News, April 3, 2020, https://www.cbsnews.com/news/timeline-president-donald-trump-changing-statements-on-coronavirus/.
14. Nolan D. McCaskill, "Trump Predicts Victory over Coronavirus 'Much Sooner' Than Expected," *Politico,* March 22, 2020, https://www.politico.com/news/2020/03/22/trump-predicts-victory-coronavirus-143459.
15. Brill, *The Death of Truth,* 116–17.
16. Brill, *The Death of Truth,* 117.
17. Brill, *The Death of Truth,* 118.
18. Monica Gandhi, "We Didn't Get Covid Right. But This Is Just Wrong," *New York Times,* July 17, 2025, https://www.nytimes.com/2025/07/17/opinion/covid-trump-skeptic-health-science.html.
19. Annie Tomasini, email to author, June 3, 2025.
20. Madeleine Keck and Nora Holz, "New Zealand, Vietnam, Taiwan Top List of Countries With the Most Effective Covid-19 Responses," *Global Citizen,* February 1, 2021, https://www.globalcitizen.org/en/content/new-zealand-vietnam-top-list-covid-19/.
21. Steffie Woolhander, David U. Himmelstein, Sameer Ahmed, Zinzi Bailey, Mary T. Bassett, Michael Bird, et al., "Public policy and health in the Trump era," Lancet 397, no. 10275 (2021): 705-753, https://www.thelancet.com/journals/lancet/article/PIIS0140-6736(20)32545-9/abstract.
22. Peter Marks, "The 2020 Democratic National Convention won with viewers. Now its organizers hope to win an Emmy," *Washington Post,* June 23, 2021, https://www.washingtonpost.com/entertainment/tv/dnc-convention-emmy-award-campaign/2021/06/22/5b6c6202-d2a0-11eb-9f29-e9e6c9e843c6_story.html.
23. Kate Sullivan, "13-Year-Old Who Stutters Says at DNC Joe Biden Made Him 'Feel More Confident,'" CNN, August 21, 2020, https://www.cnn.com/2020/08/20/politics/13-year-old-stutter-convention-joe-biden; Will Weissert, "In Moving Speech, Boy Says Biden Helped Him Overcome Stutter," Associated Press, August, 21, 2020, https://apnews.com/article/election-2020-ap-top-news-politics-lifestyle-nh-state-wire-30951d24b0dab8b9ced01704d8ee9f2c; "Brayden Harrington: Joe Biden and the Boy with the Stutter," BBC, August 21, 2020, https://www.bbc.com/news/election-us-2020-53858819.

24. "Transcript: Joe Biden's DNC Speech," CNN, August 21, 2020, https://www.cnn.com/2020/08/20/politics/biden-dnc-speech-transcript.
25. Thomas Kaplan, Katie Glueck, and Michael Cooper, "Nearing the Finish Line in Scranton, Pa., Biden Says, 'You Got to Run Through the Tape, Man,'" *New York Times*, November 3, 2020, https://www.nytimes.com/2020/11/02/us/politics/biden-pennsylvania-results.html.
26. Robert Caro, *The Years of Lyndon Johnson*, vol. 4, *The Passage of Power* (Knopf, 2012), 349.
27. Yamiche Alcindor, "Biden Team Announces New Staff Picks, Highlighting Effort to 'Build an Administration That Looks Like America,'" *PBS News*, December 30, 2020, https://www.pbs.org/newshour/politics/biden-team-announces-new-staff-picks-highlighting-effort-to-build-an-administration-that-looks-like-america.
28. Alisha Haridasani Gupta, "Fulfilling a Promise: A Cabinet That 'Looks Like America,'" *New York Times*, January 21, 2021, https://www.nytimes.com/2021/01/21/us/biden-cabinet-diversity-gender-race.html.
29. Brill, *The Death of Truth*, 236; Morgan Chalfant, "Trump: 'The Only Way We're Going to Lose This Election Is If the Election Is Rigged,'" *The Hill*, August 17, 2020, https://thehill.com/homenews/administration/512424-trump-the-only-way-we-are-going-to-lose-this-election-is-if-the/.
30. Abraham Lincoln, "July 4, 1861: July 4th Message to Congress," Miller Center, 2026, https://millercenter.org/the-presidency/presidential-speeches/july-4-1861-july-4th-message-congress.

## CHAPTER THREE: RESCUE

1. Tom Tapp, "Joe Biden Announces 'Wartime Effort' Against Covid-19; Invokes Defense Production Act for Vaccines," *Deadline*, January 21, 2021, https://deadline.com/2021/01/joe-biden-wartime-effort-covid-19-plan-1234677845/.
2. Frank O'Connor, *An Only Child* (Macmillan, 1961), 180.
3. Sheryl Gay Stolberg, "Biden Unveils National Strategy That Trump Resisted," *New York Times*, January 21, 2021, https://www.nytimes.com/2021/01/21/us/politics/biden-coronavirus-response.html.
4. Apoorva Mandavilli, "Emerging Coronavirus Variants May Pose Challenges to Vaccines," *New York Times*, January 20, 2021, https://www.nytimes.com/2021/01/20/health/coronavirus-variants-immunity.html.
5. Daihai He et al., "Evaluation of Effectiveness of Global COVID-10 Vaccination Campaign," *Emerging Effective Diseases* 28, no. 9 (2022), https://wwwnc.cdc.gov/eid/article/28/9/21-2226_article.
6. Victoria Guida, "Trump Is Misleading You with Covid-Era Statistics. So Is Biden," *Politico*, April 19, 2024, https://www.politico.com/news/magazine/2024/04/19/how-to-mislead-with-covid-era-statistics-00153176; Chelsey Cox, "Fact Check: Chart of Job Growth Shows Historic Unemployment Under Trump," *USA Today*, November 6, 2020, https://www.usatoday.com/story/news/factcheck/2020/11/06/fact-check-pandemic-unaccounted-presidential-job-growth-chart/6177339002/.
7. Lorie Konish, "Here's how Americans are using their $1,400 stimulus checks," *CNBC*, April 14, 2021, https://www.cnbc.com/2021/04/14/heres-how-americans-are-using-their-1400-stimulus-checks.html.
8. Jennifer Scholtes, "Shalanda Young Shines as Tanden's Nomination Nixed," *Politico*, March 2, 2021, https://www.politico.com/news/2021/03/02/shalanda-young-neera-tanden-omb-472753.



9780316598484_PromiseMeAmerica_int_1P.indd 417 7/17/26 1:51 PM

9. John Dickerson, *The Hardest Job in the World: The American Presidency* (Random House, 2020), 152.
10. Dickerson, *The Hardest Job in the World*, 155.
11. Meagan C. Fitzpatrick, Seyed M. Moghadas, Abhishek Pandey, and Alison P. Galvani, "Two Years of U.S. COVID-19 Vaccines Have Prevented Millions of Hospitalizations and Deaths," *Commonwealth Fund*, December 13, 2022, https://www.commonwealthfund.org/blog/2022/two-years-covid-vaccines-prevented-millions-deaths-hospitalizations.

## CHAPTER FOUR: TAKING ON TRICKLE-DOWN

1. "Income Inequality in the United States," Inequality.org, accessed 2026, https://inequality.org/facts/income-inequality/.
2. Paul Krugman, "Why Did the Rich Pull Away from the Rest? Understanding Inequality: Part I," Stone Center on Socio-Economic Inequality, July 7, 2025, https://stonecenter.gc.cuny.edu/why-did-the-rich-pull-away-from-the-rest-paul-krugman-understanding-inequality-part-i/.
3. Seniboye Tienabeso, "Warren Buffett and His Secretary on Their Tax Rates," *ABC News*, January 25, 2012, https://abcnews.com/blogs/business/2012/01/warren-buffett-and-his-secretary-talk-taxes.
4. Madeleine Luckel, "There's a Very Clear Theme to the Art That President Biden Has Chosen for the Oval Office," *Architectural Digest*, January 21, 2021, https://www.architecturaldigest.com/story/theres-a-very-clear-theme-to-the-art-that-president-biden-has-chosen-for-the-oval-office.
5. Nelson D. Schwartz, "Continuing Job Losses Put Spotlight on Economic Relief," *New York Times*, January 21, 2021, https://www.nytimes.com/2021/01/21/business/economy/unemployment-claims-economy.html.
6. Christian E. Weller, "Biden's Jobs Boom: How Policies Boosted the Labor Market Recovery in 2021," Center for American Progress, April 28, 2022, https://www.americanprogress.org/article/bidens-jobs-boom-how-policies-boosted-the-labor-market-recovery-in-2021/.
7. "Biden Nears 100-Day Mark with Strong Approval, Positive Rating for Vaccine Rollout," Pew Research Center, April 15, 2021, https://www.pewresearch.org/politics/2021/04/15/biden-nears-100-day-mark-with-strong-approval-positive-rating-for-vaccine-rollout/.
8. Ed Mortimer, "Declining Global Ranking for U.S. Infrastructure + Looming Highway Trust Fund Insolvency = Need for New Investment," US Chamber of Commerce, January 13, 2019, https://www.uschamber.com/infrastructure/declining-global-ranking-for-u-s-infrastructure-looming-highway-trust-fund-insolvency-need-for-new-investment; Ian Duncan, "Here's How U.S. Infrastructure Compares to the Rest of the World," *Washington Post*, April 30, 2021, https://www.washingtonpost.com/transportation/2021/04/30/us-infrastructure-ranking/.
9. Robert S. Kirk and William J. Mallett, "Infrastructure Investment and Jobs Act: Highway Bridges," Congressional Research Service, May 6, 2022, https://www.everycrsreport.com/files/2022-05-06_IF12099_d188dd74f213ca1835e163da3f9c67b62305af79.pdf.
10. "2021 Report Card for America's Infrastructure," American Society of Civil Engineers, 2026, https://2021.infrastructurereportcard.org/.
11. Abraham Lincoln, "Speech in the United States House of Representatives Regarding Internal Improvements, [20 June 1848]," *Papers of Abraham Lincoln Digital Library*, 2018, https://papersofabrahamlincoln.org/documents/D200498.
12. Di Dongsheng, "The 'Secret Deal' That Western Media Never Tell You in China's BRI," The

China Academy, November 2, 2023, https://thechinaacademy.org/western-multinational-companies-are-making-a-fortune-from-the-belt-and-road-initiative/.

13. Frank Fang, "Government Agenda, Subsidies Drive Exponential Increase in Chinese Patent Filings," *Epoch Times*, October 29, 2018, https://www.theepochtimes.com/china/government-agenda-subsidies-drive-exponential-increase-in-chinese-patent-filings-2702602; "What Takes the U.S. 20 Years, China Built in 43 Hours—Here's the Proof!," posted March 23, 2025, by Machine Eye, YouTube, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=E-MZXdT3h1g; Austin Ramzy, "China Opens Giant Sea Bridge Linking Hong Kong, Macau and Mainland," *New York Times*, October 23, 2018, https://www.nytimes.com/2018/10/23/world/asia/china-bridge-hong-kong-macau-zhuhai.html.
14. Editorial Board, "Keep the Trains and Buses Running," *New York Times*, January 21, 2021, https://www.nytimes.com/2021/01/21/opinion/public-transit-funding.html.
15. "Capito Statement on President Biden Ending Infrastructure Negotiations with Republicans," *U.S. Senate Committee on Environment & Public Works*, June 8, 2021, https://www.epw.senate.gov/public/index.cfm/2021/6/capito-statement-on-president-biden-ending-infrastructure-negotiations-with-republicans.
16. Burgess Everett and Marianne Levine, "The Power of 10: Inside the 'Unlikely Partnership' That Sealed an Infrastructure Win," *Politico*, August 10, 2021, https://www.politico.com/news/2021/08/10/senate-infrastructure-bipartisan-partnership-502722.
17. Joe R. Reeder and Tommy Hall, "Cybersecurity's Pearl Harbor Moment: Lessons Learned from the Colonial Pipeline Ransomware Attack," *Cyber Defense Review* 6, no. 3 (2021): 15–39, https://cyberdefensereview.army.mil/Portals/6/Documents/2021_summer_cdr/02_ReederHall_CDR_V6N3_2021.pdf.
18. "Attorney General Merrick B. Garland Remarks: Domestic Terrorism Policy," US Department of Justice Archives, June 15, 2021, https://www.justice.gov/archives/opa/speech/attorney-general-merrick-b-garland-remarks-domestic-terrorism-policy-address.
19. Everett and Levine, "The Power of 10."
20. Quint Forgey, "'You've Been Very Supportive': Biden and DeSantis Play Nice as President Surveys Surfside," *Politico*, July 1, 2021, https://www.politico.com/news/2021/07/01/biden-desantis-florida-condo-collapse-497550.
21. Everett and Levine, "The Power of 10."
22. "Full Speech: Mitch Landrieu Addresses Removal of Confederate Statues," speech, May 19, 2017, posted May 31, 2017, by Washington Post, YouTube, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=csMbjG0-6Ak.

## CHAPTER FIVE: AMERICA'S BACK

1. Bastian Herre, "The World Has Recently Become Less Democratic," *Our World in Data*, September 6, 2022, https://ourworldindata.org/less-democratic; Robert Kagan, *The Jungle Grows Back: America and Our Imperiled World* (Knopf, 2018), 3–4.
2. *Freedom in the World: 2017* (Freedom House, 2017), https://freedomhouse.org/sites/default/files/2020-02/FH_FIW_2017_Report_Final.pdf.
3. Jeffrey Goldberg, "Trump: Americans Who Died in War Are 'Losers' and 'Suckers,'" *Atlantic*, September 3, 2020, https://www.theatlantic.com/politics/archive/2020/09/trump-americans-who-died-at-war-are-losers-and-suckers/615997/.
4. Julian E. Barnes and Helene Cooper, "Trump Discussed Pulling U.S. from NATO, Aides Say amid New Concerns over Russia," *New York Times*, January 14, 2019, https://www.nytimes.com/2019/01/14/us/politics/nato-president-trump.html; Steven Erlanger, Julie Hirschfeld Davis, and Katie Rogers, "NATO Survives Trump, but the Turmoil Is Leaving

Scars," *New York Times*, July 12, 2018, https://www.nytimes.com/2018/07/12/world/europe/trump-nato-russia.html.

5. Almut Möller, "Is Merkel the New 'Leader of the Free World'?," European Council on Foreign Relations, November 25, 2016, https://ecfr.eu/article/commentary_is_merkel_the_new_leader_of_the_free_world_7190/.
6. Deborah Cole, "Merkel: I Mistook Trump for 'Someone Completely Normal,'" *Guardian*, https://www.theguardian.com/world/2024/nov/21/angela-merkel-i-mistook-donald-trump-for-someone-completely-normal.
7. Tatiana Stanovaya, "Putin's Grip on Power: The Beginning of the End?," *Expressions by Montaigne*, November 5, 2021, https://www.institutmontaigne.org/en/expressions/putins-grip-power-beginning-end.
8. Oliver Bullough, "Vladimir Putin: The Rebuilding of 'Soviet' Russia," *BBC News*, March 28, 2014, https://www.bbc.com/news/magazine-26769481; "Article by Vladimir Putin 'On the Historical Unity of Russians and Ukrainians,'" *President of Russia*, July 12, 2021, http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/66181; "Putin: Soviet Collapse a 'Genuine Tragedy,'" *NBC News*, April 25, 2005, https://www.nbcnews.com/id/wbna7632057.
9. Kurt M. Campbell and Rush Doshi, "Why America Needs a New Strategy of Allied Scale to Offset Beijing's Enduring Advantages," *Foreign Affairs*, April 10, 2025, https://www.foreignaffairs.com/china/underestimating-china.
10. "New Data Show the Failures of Donald Trump's China Trade Strategy," *Economist*, February 10, 2021, https://www.economist.com/graphic-detail/2021/02/10/new-data-show-the-failures-of-donald-trumps-china-trade-strategy; "How China Won Trump's Trade War and Got Americans to Foot the Bill," *Bloomberg News*, January 11, 2021, https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2021-01-11/how-china-won-trump-s-good-and-easy-to-win-trade-war.
11. Lily Kuo and Niko Kommenda, "What Is China's 'Belt and Road' Initiative?," *Guardian*, July 30, 2018, https://www.theguardian.com/cities/ng-interactive/2018/jul/30/what-china-belt-road-initiative-silk-road-explainer; "The Pandemic Is Hurting China's Belt and Road Initiative," *Economist*, June 4, 2020, https://www.economist.com/china/2020/06/04/the-pandemic-is-hurting-chinas-belt-and-road-initiative.
12. Fareed Zakaria, *The Post-American World* (W.W. Norton, 2008), 20.
13. David Rieff, "Triumph Without Victory," *Los Angeles Times*, April 7, 2002, https://www.latimes.com/archives/la-xpm-2002-apr-07-bk-rieff7-story.html.
14. David E. Sanger, "Trump Relies on Personal Diplomacy with Putin. The Result Is a Strategic Muddle," *New York Times*, August 25, 2025, https://www.nytimes.com/2025/08/25/us/politics/trump-diplomacy-putin-alaska-ukraine-war.html.
15. Ron Elving, "Trump's Helsinki Bow to Putin Leaves World Wondering: Why?," NPR, July 17, 2018, https://www.npr.org/2018/07/17/629601233/trumps-helsinki-bow-to-putin-leaves-world-wondering-whats-up.
16. Lara Jakes, "To 'Re-Engage the World,' Biden Looks to Win Over U.S. Diplomats First," *New York Times*, February 4, 2021, https://www.nytimes.com/2021/02/04/us/politics/biden-state-department.html.
17. Isabel Hinton, "How China Became the World's Leader on Renewable Energy," *Yale Environment 360*, March 13, 2024, https://e360.yale.edu/features/china-renewable-energy.
18. "September 17, 1787: A Republic, If You Can Keep It," *National Park Service*, September 22, 2023, https://www.nps.gov/articles/000/constitutionalconvention-september17.htm.
19. Prime Minister's Office, "Readout of G7 Leaders' Virtual Meeting: 19 February 2021,"

*Gov.uk*, February 19, 2021, https://www.gov.uk/government/news/readout-of-g7-leaders-virtual-meeting-19-february-2021.

20. "G7 Expresses 'Grave Concerns' over Electoral Changes in Hong Kong," Reuters, March 13, 2021, https://www.reuters.com/article/hongkong-security-g7/g7-expresses-grave-concerns-over-electoral-changes-in-hong-kong-idINKBN2B50EC/.
21. Brad Plumer, "Biden Wants to Slash Emissions. Success Would Mean a Very Different America," *New York Times*, April 22, 2021, https://www.nytimes.com/live/2021/04/22/us/biden-earth-day-climate-summit#biden-emissions-target-economy.
22. Maggie Astor, "Here's What Canada, Russia and Other Countries Have Committed to So Far Today," *New York Times*, April 22, 2021, https://www.nytimes.com/live/2021/04/22/us/biden-earth-day-climate-summit#heres-what-canada-russia-and-other-countries-have-committed-to-so-far-today.
23. "Biden's Intelligence Director Vows to Put Climate at 'Center' of Foreign Policy," *New York Times*, April 22, 2021, https://www.nytimes.com/live/2021/04/22/us/biden-earth-day-climate-summit/; David Lawder, Andrea Shalal, and Ann Saphir, "Yellen Lays Out 'Bold' Climate Agenda for U.S. Economy, Markets," Reuters, April 21, 2021, https://www.reuters.com/business/sustainable-business/yellen-lays-out-bold-climate-agenda-us-economy-markets-2021-04-21/; "Key Takeaways from the Biden Earth Day Summit," Reuters, April 22, 2021, https://www.reuters.com/business/environment/takeaways-key-takeaways-biden-earth-day-summit-2021-04-22/.
24. "G7: Joe Biden Is Breath of Fresh Air, Says Boris Johnson," *BBC*, June 10, 2021, https://www.bbc.com/news/uk-politics-57433296.
25. David E. Sanger and Michael D. Shear, "Eighty Years Later, Biden and Johnson Revise the Atlantic Charter for a New Era," *New York Times*, June 10, 2021, https://www.nytimes.com/2021/06/10/world/europe/biden-johnson-atlantic-charter.html.
26. David E. Sanger, Michael D. Shear, and Anton Troianovski, "Biden and Putin Express Desire for Better Relations at Summit Shaped by Disputes," *New York Times*, June 16, 2021, https://www.nytimes.com/2021/06/16/world/europe/biden-putin-geneva-meeting.html.
27. David Kindy, "Permafrost Thaw in Siberia Creates a Ticking 'Methane Bomb' of Greenhouse Gases, Scientists Warn," *Smithsonian Magazine*, August 5, 2021, https://www.smithsonianmag.com/smart-news/ticking-timebomb-siberia-thawing-permafrost-releases-more-methane-180978381/.

## CHAPTER SIX: AFGHANISTAN

1. Dexter Filkins, "Biden Arrives in Afghanistan to Discuss the War, "*New York Times*, January 10, 2009, https://www.nytimes.com/2009/01/11/world/asia/11afghan.html.
2. "The U.S. War in Afghanistan," Council on Foreign Relations, September 27, 2022, https://www.cfr.org/articles/us-war-afghanistan.
3. "The U.S. War in Afghanistan," Council on Foreign Relations.
4. Julie Hirschfeld Davis and Mark Landler, "Trump Outlines New Afghanistan Strategy with Few Details," *New York Times*, August 21, 2017, https://www.nytimes.com/2017/08/21/world/asia/afghanistan-troops-trump.html; "Remarks by President Trump on the Strategy in Afghanistan and South Asia," *Trump White House*, August 21, 2017, https://trumpwhitehouse.archives.gov/briefings-statements/remarks-president-trump-strategy-afghanistan-south-asia/; David Nakamura and Abby Phillip, "Trump Announces New Strategy for Afghanistan That Calls for a Troop Increase," *Washington Post*, August 21, 2017, https://www.washingtonpost.com/politics/trump-expected-to-announce-small-troop



9780316598484_PromiseMeAmerica_int_1P.indd 421 7/17/26 1:51 PM

-increase-in-afghanistan-in-prime-time-address/2017/08/21/eb3a513e-868a-11e7-a94f-3139abce39f5_story.html; John Dickerson, *The Hardest Job in the World: The American Presidency* (Random House, 2020), 228.

5. Davis and Landler, "Trump Outlines New Afghanistan Strategy with Few Details"; "Remarks by President Trump on the Strategy in Afghanistan and South Asia"; Nakamura and Phillip, "Trump Announces New Strategy for Afghanistan That Calls for a Troop Increase."
6. "The U.S. War in Afghanistan," Council on Foreign Relations.
7. Dickerson, *The Hardest Job in the World*, 24.
8. "Excerpts of Call Between Joe Biden and Ashraf Ghani July 23," Reuters, August 31, 2021, https://www.reuters.com/world/excerpts-call-between-joe-biden-ashraf-ghani-july-23-2021-08-31/.
9. "Remarks by President Biden on Afghanistan," *Biden White House*, August 16, 2021, https://bidenwhitehouse.archives.gov/briefing-room/speeches-remarks/2021/08/16/remarks-by-president-biden-on-afghanistan/.
10. Kevin Liptak, Kaitlan Collins, Jeremy Herb, and Phil Mattingly, "'A Direct Punch in the Gut': Inside Biden's Biggest Crisis as he Races to Withdraw from Afghanistan," *CNN*, August 28, 2021, https://www.cnn.com/2021/08/28/politics/biden-behind-scenes-crisis-attack-kabul-afghanistan.
11. Neta C. Crawford and Catherine Lutz, "Human Cost of Post-9/11 Wars: Direct War Deaths in Major War Zones, Afghanistan and Pakistan (Oct. 2001–Aug. 2021); Iraq (March 2003–Aug. 2021); Syria (Sep. 2014–May 2021); Yemen (Oct. 2002–Aug 2021) and Other Post-9/11 War Zones," Watson Institute, September 1, 2021, https://costsofwar.watson.brown.edu/sites/default/files/papers/Costs-of-War_Direct-War-Deaths_9-1-21.pdf; Ian Shapira, "A CIA suicide sparks hard questions about the agency's Memorial Wall," *Washington Post*, May 21, 2019, https://www.washingtonpost.com/local/a-cia-suicide-sparks-hard-questions-about-the-agencys-memorial-wall/2019/05/18/20c8c284-7687-11e9-bd25-c989555e7766_story.html.
12. Ana Swanson and Katie Rogers, "U.S. Agrees to Roll Back European Steel and Aluminum Tariffs," *New York Times*, October 30, 2021, https://www.nytimes.com/2021/10/30/business/economy/biden-steel-tariffs-europe.html.
13. Maegan Vazquez and Kevin Liptak, "'God Love Ya': Warm Relationship Between the World's Most Powerful Catholics on Display as Biden and Pope Francis Meet," *CNN*, October 29, 2021, https://www.cnn.com/2021/10/29/politics/pope-francis-joe-biden-meeting.
14. "Summit for Democracy 2021," U.S. Department of State, 2021, https://2021-2025.state.gov/summit-for-democracy-2021/.
15. "Remarks by President Biden at the Summit for Democracy Opening Session," *Biden White House*, December 9, 2021, https://bidenwhitehouse.archives.gov/briefing-room/speeches-remarks/2021/12/09/remarks-by-president-biden-at-the-summit-for-democracy-opening-session/.
16. John Lewis, "Together, You Can Redeem the Soul of Our Nation," *New York Times*, July 30, 2020, https://www.nytimes.com/2020/07/30/opinion/john-lewis-civil-rights-america.html.
17. "Putin Laments Soviet Breakup as Demise of 'Historical Russia,' amid Ukraine Fears," *Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty*, December 13, 2021, https://www.rferl.org/a/putin-historical-russia-soviet-breakup-ukraine/31606186.html; Andrew Osborn and Andrey Ostroukh, "Putin Rues Soviet Collapse as Demise of 'Historical Russia,'" Reuters, December 12, 2021, https://www.reuters.com/world/europe/putin-rues-soviet-collapse-demise-historical



9780316598484_PromiseMeAmerica_int_1P.indd 422 7/17/26 1:51 PM

-russia-2021-12-12/; Foreign, Commonwealth & Development Office, "Russia and Ukraine: G7 Foreign Ministers' Statement," *Gov.uk*, December 12, 2021, https://www.gov.uk/government/news/g7-foreign-ministers-statement-on-russia-and-ukraine.

## CHAPTER SEVEN: UKRAINE

1. Kaitlan Collins, Jacqueline Howard, and Betsy Klein, "First Confirmed US Case of Omicron Coronavirus Variant Detected in California," *CNN Health*, December 1, 2021, https://www.cnn.com/2021/12/01/health/us-omicron-variant-confirmed-case/index.html.
2. Sarakshi Rai, "US COVID-19 Deaths Reach 800,000," *The Hill*, December 12, 2021, https://thehill.com/policy/healthcare/public-global-health/585470-us-covid-19-deaths-reach-800000/.
3. "Statement by President Joe Biden and First Lady Jill Biden on Christmas," *Biden White House*, December 25, 2021, https://bidenwhitehouse.archives.gov/briefing-room/statements-releases/2021/12/25/statement-by-president-joe-biden-and-first-lady-jill-biden-on-christmas/.
4. "Readout of President Joseph R. Biden, Jr. Call with President Vladimir Putin of Russia," *Biden White House*, January 26, 2021, https://bidenwhitehouse.archives.gov/briefing-room/statements-releases/2021/01/26/readout-of-president-joseph-r-biden-jr-call-with-president-vladimir-putin-of-russia/; David E. Sanger, "Biden Predicts Putin Will Order Ukraine Invasion, but 'Will Regret Having Done It,'" *New York Times*, January 19, 2022, https://www.nytimes.com/2022/01/19/us/politics/biden-putin-russia-ukraine.html.
5. "Article by Vladimir Putin 'On the Historical Unity of Russians and Ukrainians,'" *President of Russia*, July 12, 2021, http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/66181.
6. Michael D. Shear, Julian E. Barnes, and Eric Schmitt, "Wooing Allies, Publicizing Putin's Plans: Inside Biden's Race to Prevent War," *New York Times*, February 21, 2022, https://www.nytimes.com/2022/02/21/us/politics/biden-putin.html; Julian E. Barnes and David E. Sanger, "Accurate U.S. Intelligence Did Not Stop Putin, but It Gave Biden Big Advantages," *New York Times*, February 24, 2022, https://www.nytimes.com/2022/02/24/world/europe/intelligence-putin-biden-ukraine-leverage.html.
7. Barnes and Sanger, "Accurate U.S. Intelligence Did Not Stop Putin, but It Gave Biden Big Advantages."
8. Shear, Barnes, and Schmitt, "Wooing Allies, Publicizing Putin's Plans."
9. Shear, Barnes, and Schmitt, "Wooing Allies, Publicizing Putin's Plans."
10. Natasha Bertrand, Jim Sciutto, and Kylie Atwood, "CIA Director Dispatched to Moscow to Warn Russia over Troop Buildup Near Ukraine," *CNN*, November 5, 2021, https://edition.cnn.com/2021/11/05/politics/bill-burns-moscow-ukraine; Barnes and Sanger, "Accurate U.S. Intelligence Did Not Stop Putin, but It Gave Biden Big Advantages"; Shear, Barnes, and Schmitt, "Wooing Allies, Publicizing Putin's Plans."
11. *Dunderpedia: The Office Wiki*, "Scranton," last modified November 9, 2023, 22:17 (UTC), https://theoffice.fandom.com/wiki/Scranton.
12. "The Second Presidential Debate," *New York Times*, October 7, 2008, www.nytimes.com/elections/2008/president/debates/transcripts/second-presidential-debate.html.
13. David Remnick, "Watching the Eclipse," *New Yorker*, August 2, 2014, https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2014/08/11/watching-eclipse.
14. Remnick, "Watching the Eclipse."
15. Remnick, "Watching the Eclipse."
16. Antony Blinken, conversation with author, September 22, 2025.



9780316598484_PromiseMeAmerica_int_1P.indd 423 7/17/26 1:51 PM

17. Brian Bonner, "Biden's 6 Visits to Ukraine as Vice President," *Kyiv Post*, November 13, 2020, https://www.kyivpost.com/post/7350.
18. Bonner, "Biden's 6 Visits to Ukraine as Vice President."
19. "Speech: Joe Biden Publicly Launches His Campaign in Philadelphia, PA—May 18, 2019," *Roll Call*, Factbase Transcripts, 2026, https://rollcall.com/factbase/biden/transcript/joe-biden-speech-philadelphia-pennsylvania-may-18-2019/.
20. Anton Troianovski and David E. Sanger, "Russia Issues Subtle Threats More Far-Reaching Than a Ukraine Invasion," *New York Times*, January 16, 2022, https://www.nytimes.com/2022/01/16/world/europe/russia-ukraine-invasion.html.
21. Michael Schwirtz, David E. Sanger, and Mark Landler, "Britain Says Moscow Is Plotting to Install a Pro-Russian Leader in Ukraine," *New York Times*, January 22, 2022, https://www.nytimes.com/2022/01/22/world/europe/ukraine-russia-coup-britain.html.
22. Troianovski and Sanger, "Russia Issues Subtle Threats More Far-Reaching Than a Ukraine Invasion."
23. David E. Sanger, "U.S. Says Russia Sent Saboteurs into Ukraine to Create Pretext for Invasion," *New York Times*, January 14, 2022, https://www.nytimes.com/2022/01/14/us/politics/russia-ukraine-us-intelligence.html.
24. Troianovski and Sanger, "Russia Issues Subtle Threats More Far-Reaching Than a Ukraine Invasion."
25. David E. Sanger, *New Cold Wars: China's Rise, Russia's Invasion, and America's Struggle to Defend the West* (Crown, 2024), 42.
26. "Address by the President of the Russian Federation," *President of Russia*, February 21, 2022, http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/67828.
27. "Remarks by President Biden Announcing Response to Russian Actions in Ukraine," *Biden White House*, February 22, 2022, https://bidenwhitehouse.archives.gov/briefing-room/speeches-remarks/2022/02/22/remarks-by-president-biden-announcing-response-to-russian-actions-in-ukraine/.

## CHAPTER EIGHT: WAR

1. "Our Experts Decode the Putin Speech That Launched Russia's Invasion of Ukraine," Atlantic Council, February 22, 2023, https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/new-atlanticist/markup/putin-speech-ukraine-war/.
2. Anton Troianovski and Neil MacFarquhar, "Putin Announces Start to 'Military Operation' Against Ukraine," *New York Times*, February 23, 2022, https://www.nytimes.com/2022/02/23/world/europe/ukraine-russia-invasion.html.
3. Troianovski and MacFarquhar, "Putin Announces Start to 'Military Operation' Against Ukraine."
4. Troianovski and MacFarquhar, "Putin Announces Start to 'Military Operation' Against Ukraine."
5. UN Charter art. 2, para. 4, United Nations Security Council, https://main.un.org/securitycouncil/en/content/purposes-and-principles-un-chapter-i-un-charter#rel2.
6. David E. Sanger, *New Cold Wars: China's Rise, Russia's Invasion, and America's Struggle to Defend the West* (Crown, 2024), 224.
7. Michael Schwirtz, Eric Schmitt, and Neil MacFarquhar, "Russia Batters Ukraine with Artillery Strikes as West Condemns Invasion," *New York Times*, February 24, 2022, https://www.nytimes.com/2022/02/24/world/russia-ukraine-invasion-putin-biden.html.
8. Schwirtz, Schmitt, and MacFarquhar, "Russia Batters Ukraine with Artillery Strikes as West Condemns Invasion."

9. "Remarks by President Biden Announcing Response to Russian Actions in Ukraine," *Biden White House*, February 22, 2022, https://bidenwhitehouse.archives.gov/briefing-room/speeches-remarks/2022/02/22/remarks-by-president-biden-announcing-response-to-russian-actions-in-ukraine/.
10. Melissa Eddy, "Germany Puts a Stop to Nord Stream 2, a Key Russian Natural Gas Pipeline," *New York Times*, February 22, 2022, https://www.nytimes.com/live/2022/02/22/business/stock-market-economy-news#nord-stream-pipeline-germany-russia; Edward Wong, Michael Crowley, and Ana Swanson, "Biden Hits Russia with Broad Sanctions for Putin's War in Ukraine," *New York Times*, February 24, 2022, https://www.nytimes.com/2022/02/24/us/politics/biden-sanctions-russia-ukraine.html.
11. Schwirtz, Schmitt, and MacFarquhar, "Russia Batters Ukraine with Artillery Strikes as West Condemns Invasion."
12. Michael Schwirtz et al., "Putin's War," *New York Times*, December 16, 2022, https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2022/12/16/world/europe/russia-putin-war-failures-ukraine.html.
13. The entire Ukrainian Air Force had about two hundred planes; Michael Schwirtz, "Ukraine's Military Is Badly Outgunned by Russia Despite the West's Support," *New York Times*, February 24, 2022, https://www.nytimes.com/2022/02/24/world/europe/ukraine-war-military.html.
14. Schwirtz, Schmitt, and MacFarquhar, "Russia Batters Ukraine with Artillery Strikes as West Condemns Invasion."
15. Schwirtz, Schmitt, and MacFarquhar, "Russia Batters Ukraine with Artillery Strikes as West Condemns Invasion."
16. Lisa Bonos, "Ukraine is fighting back, one swear word at a time," *Washington Post*, March 4, 2022, https://www.washingtonpost.com/lifestyle/2022/03/04/ukraine-russian-warship-swear/.
17. Joe Biden, "February 24, 2022: Remarks on the Russian Invasion of Ukraine"; Azi Paybarah, "'None of Us Should Be Fooled.'"
18. Schwirtz et al., "Putin's War."
19. Sanger, *New Cold Wars*, 14–15.
20. Sanger, *New Cold Wars*, 248–49.
21. Schwirtz et al., "Putin's War."
22. Schwirtz et al., "Putin's War."
23. Schwirtz et al., "Putin's War."
24. Schwirtz et al., "Putin's War."
25. Olafimihan Oshin, "Putin calls reports 'fake,' blames UK agents," *The Hill*, April 13, 2022, https://thehill.com/homenews/3266182-putin-calls-bucha-reports-fake-blames-uk-agents/.
26. "U.S. Security Cooperation with Ukraine," U.S. Department of State, March 12, 2025, https://www.state.gov/bureau-of-political-military-affairs/releases/2025/01/u-s-security-cooperation-with-ukraine.
27. Nikolai N. Sokov, "Russia Is Deploying Nuclear Weapons in Belarus. NATO Shouldn't Take the Bait," *Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists*, April 24, 2023, https://thebulletin.org/2023/04/russia-is-deploying-nuclear-weapons-in-belarus-nato-shouldnt-take-the-bait/.
28. Dean Acheson, *Present at the Creation: My Years in the State Department* (W.W. Norton, 1987), 477.
29. "Scranton 4 Ukraine," 2026, https://www.scranton4ukraine.org/.
30. John Ismay, "With Pierogies and Artillery Shells, Scranton Fights Back in Ukraine,"



9780316598484_PromiseMeAmerica_int_1P.indd 425 7/17/26 1:51 PM

*New York Times*, January 26, 2023, https://www.nytimes.com/2023/01/26/us/ukraine-church-war-scranton.html.

31. "Scranton Army Ammunition Plant (SCAAP)," Joint Munitions Command, accessed 2026, https://www.jmc.army.mil/Installations.aspx?id=Scranton; Sam Bocetta, "Abridged History of the Scranton Army Ammunition Plant," Historical Society of Pennsylvania, September 20, 2017, https://hsp.org/blogs/fondly-pennsylvania/abridged-history-scranton-army-ammunition-plant.
32. Mansee Khurana, "Inside the U.S. City Churning Out Ukrainian Weapons," *Morning Edition*, NPR, September 16, 2024, https://www.npr.org/2024/09/15/nx-s1-5090966/scranton-munitions-factory-ukraine-war-russia-howitzer-rounds; "In Scranton, Aging US Factory Makes Shells for Ukraine | AFP," posted April 19, 2024, by AFP News Agency, YouTube, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=m1kGwcfqM18; Kayla Epstein, "This City Helped the US Back Ukraine. Now Its Role Is Uncertain," *BBC*, March 6, 2025, https://www.bbc.com/news/articles/cz7v1ejv01go.

## CHAPTER NINE: A SEASON OF PROGRESS

1. John Woodrow Cox et al., "More Than 398,000 Students Have Experienced Gun Violence at School Since Columbine," *Washington Post*, September 11, 2025, https://www.washingtonpost.com/education/interactive/school-shootings-database/.
2. Brian Bennett, "'When in God's Name Are We Going to Stand Up to the Gun Lobby?' Biden, Anguished, Reacts to Texas School Massacre," *TIME*, May 24, 2022, https://time.com/6180968/biden-uvalde-texas-gun-control-speech/.
3. "On 20th Anniversary of the Expiration of the Federal Assault Weapons Ban, Brady Calls for Action from Congress," *Brady United*, September 13, 2024, https://www.bradyunited.org/press/federal-assault-weapons-ban.
4. Samantha Putterman, "PolitiFact FL: What Does the Data Show on Deadly Shootings by 18-to-20-Year-Olds?," *WUFT*, February 7, 2024, https://www.wuft.org/politifact-florida/2024-02-07/florida-mass-shootings-18-to-20-year-olds.
5. Nick Niedzwiadek and Michael Cadenhead, "Supreme Court Justices on Abortion, During Confirmation and from the Bench," *Politico*, December 5, 2021, https://www.politico.com/news/2021/12/05/supreme-court-justices-abortion-comments-523763.
6. Supreme Court of the United States Oral Argument no. 19-1392, *Supreme Court of the United States*, December 1, 2021, https://www.supremecourt.gov/oral_arguments/argument_transcripts/2021/19-1392_bq7d.pdf.
7. Joseph Copeland, "Favorable Views of Supreme Court Remain Near Historic Low," *Pew Research Center*, September 3, 2025, https://www.pewresearch.org/short-reads/2025/09/03/favorable-views-of-supreme-court-remain-near-historic-low/.
8. Michael D. Shear and Sheryl Gay Stolberg, "Under Pressure, Biden Issues Executive Order on Abortion," *New York Times*, July 8, 2022, https://www.nytimes.com/2022/07/08/us/politics/biden-abortion-executive-order.html.
9. Adrienne Gaffney, "Where Vice President Kamala Harris Stands on Abortion," *Elle*, August 21, 2024, https://www.elle.com/culture/career-politics/a61916283/kamala-harris-abortion-rights-views-explained/.
10. Jordan Weissman, "How the Inflation Reduction Act was Really Born," *Semafor*, August 16, 2023, https://www.semafor.com/article/08/16/2023/how-the-inflation-reduction-act-was-really-born.
11. "Statement by Press Secretary Jen Psaki on Senator Joe Manchin's Comments on the Build Back Better Bill," *American Presidency Project*, December 19, 2021, https://www



9780316598484_PromiseMeAmerica_int_1P.indd 426 7/17/26 1:51 PM

.presidency.ucsb.edu/documents/statement-press-secretary-jen-psaki-senator-joe-manchins-comments-the-build-back-better.

12. Prachi Patel, "U.S. Universities Are Building a New Semiconductor Workforce," *IEEE Spectrum*, May 13, 2023, https://spectrum.ieee.org/chips-act-workforce-development.
13. Keith Krach, "The Bipartisan CHIPS Act—and a United U.S.—Are China's Biggest Fear," *Newsweek*, July 27, 2022, https://www.newsweek.com/bipartisan-chips-act-united-us-are-chinas-biggest-fear-opinion-1728573.
14. Vincent Ni, "China Denounces US Senate's $250bn Move to Boost Tech and Manufacturing," *Guardian*, June 9, 2021, https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2021/jun/09/us-senate-approves-50bn-boost-for-computer-chip-and-ai-technology-to-counter-china.
15. Krach, "The Bipartisan CHIPS Act—and a United U.S.—Are China's Biggest Fear."
16. Krach, "The Bipartisan CHIPS Act—and a United U.S.—Are China's Biggest Fear."
17. "Remarks by President Biden on Rebuilding American Manufacturing Through the CHIPS and Science Act," *Biden White House*, September 9, 2022, https://bidenwhitehouse.archives.gov/briefing-room/speeches-remarks/2022/09/09/remarks-by-president-biden-on-rebuilding-american-manufacturing-through-the-chips-and-science-act/; David Sanger, *New Cold Wars: China's Rise, Russia's Invasion, and America's Struggle to Defend the West* (Crown, 2024), 329–32.
18. "Samsung Says It Will Build $17B Chip Factory in Texas," NPR, November 24, 2021, https://www.npr.org/2021/11/24/1058770506/samsung-says-it-will-build-17b-chip-factory-in-texas; "Purdue Launches Nation's First Comprehensive Semiconductor Degrees Program," Purdue University, May 27, 2022, https://www.purdue.edu/newsroom/2022/Q2/purdue-launches-nations-first-comprehensive-semiconductor-degrees-program/; "FACT SHEET: President Biden Announces Up to $6.1 Billion Preliminary Agreement with Micron Under the CHIPS and Science Act," *Biden White House*, April 25, 2024, https://bidenwhitehouse.archives.gov/briefing-room/statements-releases/2024/04/25/fact-sheet-president-biden-announces-up-to-6-1-billion-preliminary-agreement-with-micron-under-the-chips-and-science-act/; Susan Davis, "Biden Is Giving $6 Billion to Micron for a Semiconductor Project in Upstate New York," NPR, April 25, 2024, https://www.npr.org/2024/04/25/1246888804/biden-chips-syracuse-micron.
19. "NASA Spinoff," NASA, accessed 2026, https://spinoff.nasa.gov/.
20. Krach, "The Bipartisan CHIPS Act—and a United U.S.—Are China's Biggest Fear."
21. Morgan Chalfant, "McConnell Threatens Semiconductor Bill, Prompting White House Rebuke," *The Hill*, June 30, 2022, https://thehill.com/homenews/administration/3543392-mcconnell-threatens-semiconductor-bill-prompting-white-house-rebuke/.
22. Ella Nilsen, "Clean Energy Package Would Be Biggest Legislative Climate Investment in US History," CNN, July 28, 2022, https://edition.cnn.com/2022/07/28/politics/climate-deal-joe-manchin/index.html.
23. Ella Nilsen, "Clean Energy Package Would Be Biggest Legislative Climate Investment in US History."
24. IRS, "IRS Tops $1 Billion in Past-Due Taxes Collected from Millionaires; Compliance Efforts Continue Involving High-Wealth Groups, Corporations, Partnerships," news release IR-2024-185, July 11, 2024, https://www.irs.gov/newsroom/irs-tops-1-billion-in-past-due-taxes-collected-from-millionaires-compliance-efforts-continue-involving-high-wealth-groups-corporations-partnerships.
25. Christopher Cadelago and Jonathan Lemire, "Biden Suddenly Is Piling Up Wins. Can Dems Make It Stick?," *Politico*, August 9, 2022, https://www.politico.com/news/2022/08/09/joe-biden-legislative-wins-00050461.



9780316598484_PromiseMeAmerica_int_1P.indd 427 7/17/26 1:51 PM

9780316598484_PromiseMeAmerica_int_1P.indd 427 7/17/26 1:51 PM



26. Joseph Hickman, *The Burn Pits: The Poisoning of America's Soldiers* (Hot Books, 2026).
27. Matt Viser, "Biden Wonders Publicly Whether Burn Pits Caused His Son's Death. Activists Want to Do More on the Issue," *Washington Post*, November 28, 2021, https://www.washingtonpost.com/politics/biden-beau-burn-pits/2021/11/27/894b382a-4973-11ec-b8d9-232f4afe4d9b_story.html.
28. Eugene Scott and Mike DeBonis, "Senate Republicans Block Bill to Help Veterans Exposed to Burn Pits," *Washington Post*, July 28, 2022, https://www.washingtonpost.com/politics/2022/07/28/republicans-burn-pits-veterans/.
29. Evan Osnos, "The Man Who Controls the Senate," *New Yorker*, June 21, 2021, https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2021/06/28/the-man-who-controls-the-senate.
30. Doug Bock Clark, "Close to 100,000 Voter Registrations Were Challenged in Georgia—Almost All by Just Six Right-Wing Activists," *Propublica*, July 13, 2023, https://www.propublica.org/article/right-wing-activists-georgia-voter-challenges.
31. Tim Arango et al., "How the Pelosi Attack Suspect Plunged into Online Hatred," *New York Times*, November 20, 2022, https://www.nytimes.com/2022/11/20/us/pelosi-attack-suspect-david-depape.html.
32. Adam Edelman, "Election Deniers Overwhelmingly Lost in Battleground States," *NBC News*, November 16, 2022, https://www.nbcnews.com/politics/2022-election/election-deniers-overwhelmingly-lost-battleground-states-rcna57058.
33. Hannah Panreck, "Biden's Democracy Speech Should Have Been About 'Cost of Living,' Says Former Sanders Campaign Manager," *Fox News*, November 3, 2022, https://www.foxnews.com/media/bidens-democracy-speech-should-have-been-about-cost-living-says-former-sanders-campaign-manager.
34. David Axelrod (@davidaxelrod), "Issues of democracy are hugely important at this moment and in next week's election. Totally appropriate for @POTUS to address them. Still, as a matter of practical politics, I doubt many Ds in marginal races are eager for him to be on TV tonight," X, November 2, 2022, https://x.com/davidaxelrod/status/1587894537032065024.
35. Peter Baker, "Biden Warns That 'Big Lie' Republicans Imperil American Democracy," *New York Times*, November 2, 2022, https://www.nytimes.com/2022/11/02/us/politics/biden-speech-democracy-election.html.
36. Joe Biden, "Remarks on United States Democracy and the Legacy of Former Senator John S. McCain III in Tempe, Arizona," *The American Presidency Project*, September 28, 2023, https://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/documents/remarks-united-states-democracy-and-the-legacy-former-senator-john-s-mccain-iii-tempe.
37. Peter Baker, "Biden Celebrates Beating the Odds, but He Faces a New Challenge," *New York Times*, November 9, 2022, https://www.nytimes.com/2022/11/09/us/politics/biden-midterms-republicans.html.
38. "Remarks by President Biden on Rebuilding American Manufacturing Through the CHIPS and Science Act," *Biden White House*, September 9, 2022, https://bidenwhitehouse.archives.gov/briefing-room/speeches-remarks/2022/09/09/remarks-by-president-biden-on-rebuild
39. "Takeaways from the 2022 Midterm Elections: Battle for Control of the House and Senate Still Up in the Air," *CNN*, November 10, 2022, https://www.cnn.com/2022/11/08/politics/2022-midterm-election-day-takeaways/index.html.
40. Quint Forgey and Josh Gerstein, "Justice Thomas: SCOTUS 'Should Reconsider' Contraception, Same-Sex Marriage Rulings," *Politico*, June 24, 2022, https://www.politico.com/news/2022/06/24/thomas-constitutional-rights-00042256.

41. "President Biden's Letter to the DNC's Rules and Bylaws Committee on the Presidential Nominating Process," Democrats.org, December 2, 2022, https://democrats.org/president-bidens-letter-to-the-dncs-rules-and-bylaws-committee-on-the-presidential-nominating-process/.

## CHAPTER TEN: INDIVISIBLE

1. Ayesha Rascoe and Alana Wise, "Biden Says the Tulsa Race Massacre 'Can't Be Buried, No Matter How Hard People Try,'" NPR, June 1, 2021, https://www.npr.org/2021/06/01/1001380354/biden-to-visit-tulsa-to-mark-the-1921-race-massacre-that-wrecked-black-wall-stre.
2. "June 1, 2021; Remarks Commemorating the 100th Anniversary of the Tulsa Race Massacre," Miller Center, 2026, https://millercenter.org/the-presidency/presidential-speeches/june-1-2021-remarks-commemorating-100th-anniversary-tulsa-race.
3. Gebhart v. Belton, 91 A.2d 137, 15-18 (1952), https://law.justia.com/cases/delaware/supreme-court/1952/15-18-2.html.
4. Ronald K. L. Collins and Thomas L. Ambro, "The Delaware Companion Cases to Brown v. Board," National Constitution Center, May 7, 2024, https://constitutioncenter.org/blog/the-delaware-companion-cases-to-brown-v-board.
5. Suzie Ziegler, "Fraternal Order of Police Is 'Reassured' by Biden's SCOTUS Pick," *Police1*, March 1, 2022, https://www.police1.com/legal/articles/fraternal-order-of-police-is-reassured-by-bidens-scotus-pick-L2TNlqOTYNKptNKK/.
6. Mark Walsh, "'We've made it. All of us': Jackson is honored at White House ceremony," *SCOTUSblog*, April 8, 2022, https://www.scotusblog.com/2022/04/weve-made-it-all-of-us-jackson-is-honored-at-white-house-ceremony/.
7. Clare Foran, Ali Zaslav, and Ted Barrett, "Senate Democrats Suffer Defeat on Voting Rights After Vote to Change Rules Fails," CNN, January 19, 2022, https://www.cnn.com/2022/01/19/politics/senate-voting-legislation-filibuster/index.html.
8. Brian Naylor and Juana Summers, "George Floyd's Family Meets With Biden Amid Negotiations Over Police Reform Bill," NPR, May 25, 2021, https://www.npr.org/2021/05/25/1000255304/biden-meets-with-george-floyds-family-on-1st-anniversary-of-his-death.
9. "FACT SHEET: The Biden-Harris Administration Record," *Biden White House*, January 6, 2025, https://bidenwhitehouse.archives.gov/wp-content/uploads/2025/01/The-Biden-Harris-Administration-Record.pdf.
10. Dorothy Height, "Open Wide the Freedom Gates," *New York Times*, October 5, 2003, https://www.nytimes.com/2003/10/05/books/chapters/open-wide-the-freedom-gates.html.
11. Paul Krugman, "A New K in America," *Notes on Economics and More*, Substack, December 23, 2025, https://paulkrugman.substack.com/p/a-new-k-in-america.
12. "Lyndon Baines Johnson Civil Rights Symposium Address Delivered 12 December 1972. Lyndon Baines Johnson Library, Austin, TX," *American Rhetoric Online Speech Bank*, December 11, 2020, https://www.americanrhetoric.com/speeches/lbjfinalspeech.htm.
13. Walter Naegle, "Bayard Rustin," *AFSC*, July 5, 2016, https://afsc.org/newsroom/bayard-rustin.

## CHAPTER ELEVEN: RAIL FORCE ONE

1. "Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky's Remarks to Congress," *CNN*, December 22, 2022, https://www.cnn.com/2022/12/22/politics/zelensky-congress-address-transcript.

## NOTES

2. Francesca Ebel and Mary Ilyushina, "Russians Abandon Wartime Russia in Historic Exodus," *Washington Post*, February 13, 2023, https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/2023/02/13/russia-diaspora-war-ukraine/.
3. Andrew E. Kramer and Anton Troianovski, "Deadly Russian Strikes Hammer Ukraine on New Year's Eve," *New York Times*, December 31, 2022, https://www.nytimes.com/2022/12/31/world/europe/ukraine-strikes-russia-new-years-eve.html.
4. Ellen Frances et al., "Who's Sending What to Ukraine: A New Wave of Western Weapons Explained," *Washington Post*, February 2, 2023, https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/2023/02/02/ukraine-weapons-tanks-leopard-abrams/.
5. Marianna Sotomayor, Camila DeChalus, and Liz Goodwin, "Zelensky Visit Highlights GOP Divisions on Ukraine Looming over Future Aid," *Washington Post*, December 22, 2022, https://www.washingtonpost.com/politics/2022/12/22/ukraine-zelensky-republicans-congress/.
6. Meryl Kornfield, "More Americans Say U.S. Is Giving Ukraine Too Much Aid," *Washington Post*, January 31, 2023, https://www.washingtonpost.com/politics/2023/01/31/ukraine-us-aid-war-russia/; Jeanne Whalen and Catherine Belton, "Sanctions Haven't Stopped Russia, but a New Oil Ban Could Cut Deeper," *Washington Post*, February 15, 2023, https://www.washingtonpost.com/business/2023/02/15/russia-sanctions-impact-ukraine-war/.
7. Yasmeen Abutaleb and John Hudson, "U.S. Warns Ukraine It Faces a Pivotal Moment in War," *Washington Post*, February 13, 2023, https://www.washingtonpost.com/politics/2023/02/13/us-ukraine-war-critical-moment/.
8. Julia Buckley, "The Extraordinary Train Lifeline Behind Ukraine's Rail Force One," *CNN*, February 25, 2023, https://edition.cnn.com/travel/article/ukrainian-railways-biden-diplomacy; Peter Beaumont, "'Rail Force One': How Ukraine Railways Got Joe Biden Safely to Kyiv," *Guardian*, February 24, 2023, https://www.theguardian.com/world/2023/feb/24/how-ukraine-railways-keeps-people-and-presidents-moving.
9. Leah Vredenbregt, "As Biden Heads to Israel, Looking Back at Presidents in War Zones, from Lincoln to Trump," *ABC News*, October 17, 2023, https://abcnews.go.com/Politics/after-bidens-surprise-ukraine-trip-back-presidents-war/story?id=97331309.
10. "Who Saved the Gilbert Stuart Painting of George Washington from the White House Before It Was Burned in 1814?," *White House Historical Association*, 2026, https://www.whitehousehistory.org/questions/how-did-dolley-madison-save-george-washingtons-portrait.
11. Cyrus Beschloss, "A Close Call at Fort Stevens," *President Lincoln's Cottage*, July 10, 2014, https://www.lincolncottage.org/a-close-call-at-fort-stevens/.
12. Missy Ryan et al., "On Surprise Trip to Kyiv, Biden Vows Enduring Support for Ukraine," *Washington Post*, February 20, 2023, https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/2023/02/20/president-biden-kyiv-ukraine-visit-war/.
13. "Plane, Motorcade, Train: How Joe Biden Got to Kyiv in Secret," *Al Jazeera*, February 21, 2023, https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2023/2/21/plane-motorcade-train-how-joe-biden-got-to-kyiv-in-secret.
14. Annabelle Timsit and Matt Viser, "A Timeline of Biden's Secretive Trip into and out of Kyiv," *Washington Post*, February 20, 2023, https://www.washingtonpost.com/politics/2023/02/20/biden-visit-ukraine-kyiv-details/; Matt Viser and Cleve R. Wootson Jr., "Cloak-and-Dagger Moves Allow Biden to Sneak into Ukraine's War Zone," *Washington Post*, February 20, 2023, https://www.washingtonpost.com/politics/2023/02/20/secrecy-security-biden-trip-to-kyiv/.



9780316598484_PromiseMeAmerica_int_1P.indd 430 7/17/26 1:51 PM

15. Viser and Wootson, "Cloak-and-Dagger Moves Allow Biden to Sneak into Ukraine's War Zone."
16. Sabrina Siddiqui, "'How Will I Pump?': When Your First Work Trip After Maternity Leave Is to Ukraine with President Biden," March 8, 2023, https://www.wsj.com/articles/biden-ukraine-trip-russia-sabrina-siddiqui-868556ea.
17. Viser and Wootson, "Cloak-and-Dagger Moves Allow Biden to Sneak into Ukraine's War Zone"; Timsit and Viser, "A Timeline of Biden's Secretive Trip into and out of Kyiv."
18. Viser and Wootson, "Cloak-and-Dagger Moves Allow Biden to Sneak into Ukraine's War Zone"; Timsit and Viser, "A Timeline of Biden's Secretive Trip into and out of Kyiv"
19. Viser and Wootson, "Cloak-and-Dagger Moves Allow Biden to Sneak into Ukraine's War Zone"; Timsit and Viser, "A Timeline of Biden's Secretive Trip into and out of Kyiv"; Tomasini, email to author, September 25, 2025.
20. Viser and Wootson, "Cloak-and-Dagger Moves Allow Biden to Sneak into Ukraine's War Zone"; Timsit and Viser, "A Timeline of Biden's Secretive Trip into and out of Kyiv"; Tomasini, email to author, September 25, 2025. A White House photographer, Adam Schultz, also was added to the manifest at the last minute.
21. Timsit and Viser, "A Timeline of Biden's Secretive Trip into and out of Kyiv."
22. Viser and Wootson, "Cloak-and-Dagger Moves Allow Biden to Sneak into Ukraine's War Zone"; Timsit and Viser, "A Timeline of Biden's Secretive Trip into and out of Kyiv"; Constant Méheut and Jenny Gross, "Inside 'Rail Force One': The Trains That Take World Leaders to Ukraine," *New York Times*, December 6, 2024, https://www.nytimes.com/2024/12/06/world/europe/ukraine-trains-leader-visits.html.
23. Beaumont, "'Rail Force One'"; Méheut and Gross, "Inside 'Rail Force One.'"
24. Beaumont, "'Rail Force One'"; Buckley, "The Extraordinary Train Lifeline Behind Ukraine's Rail Force One."
25. Beaumont, "'Rail Force One.'"
26. The Freedom Train came through Scranton on November 12, 1947, and through Wilmington on November 21, 1947; "The 1947–1949 Freedom Train Story," Freedomtrain.org, 2026, https://www.freedomtrain.org/freedom-train-home.htm.
27. "50th Anniversary: Delaware Mourns RFK Assassination; Train Carries Body Through Wilmington," *Delaware Online*, June 5, 2018, https://www.delawareonline.com/story/news/local/2018/06/05/robert-f-kennedy-assassination-mourned-delaware/672728002/; Louis Menand, "Robert F. Kennedy's Funeral Train, Fifty Years Later," *New Yorker*, April 3, 2018, https://www.newyorker.com/culture/photo-booth/robert-f-kennedys-funeral-train-fifty-years-later.
28. "Plane, Motorcade, Train," *Al Jazeera;* Missy Ryan and Alice Martins, "Biden Makes Surprise Trip to Ukraine Ahead of Russian Invasion Anniversary," *Washington Post*, February 20, 2023, https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/2023/02/20/president-biden-kyiv-ukraine-visit-war/.
29. Ryan and Martins, "Biden Makes Surprise Trip to Ukraine Ahead of Russian Invasion Anniversary"; Luke Harding, "'This Is a Part of History': Kyiv Citizens Delighted by Joe Biden's Surprise Visit," *Guardian*, February 20, 2023, https://www.theguardian.com/world/2023/feb/20/this-is-a-part-of-history-kyiv-citizens-delighted-by-joe-biden-surprise-visit; Peter Baker and Andrew E. Kramer, "'It's Complicated': How Biden and Zelensky Forged a Wartime Partnership," *New York Times*, February 24, 2023, https://www.nytimes.com/2023/02/24/us/politics/biden-zelensky-ukraine-russia.html.
30. Ryan and Martins, "Biden Makes Surprise Trip to Ukraine Ahead of Russian Invasion Anniversary."

31. Viser and Wootson, "Cloak-and-Dagger Moves Allow Biden to Sneak into Ukraine's War Zone"; Ryan and Martins, "Biden Makes Surprise Trip to Ukraine Ahead of Russian Invasion Anniversary."
32. Timsit and Viser, "A Timeline of Biden's Secretive Trip into and out of Kyiv"; Viser and Wootson, "Cloak-and-Dagger Moves Allow Biden to Sneak into Ukraine's War Zone."
33. Timsit and Viser, "A Timeline of Biden's Secretive Trip into and out of Kyiv"; Annie Tomasini, email to author, October 9, 2025; Alexander Kamyshin (@AKamyshin), "So, it was an honor and privilege for me and the whole #IronTeam of @Ukrzaliznytsia to deal with this visit. I must say, it was complicated. But we did it. That's how #RailForceOne appeared," X, February 21, 2023, https://x.com/AKamyshin/status/1627957198138535938.
34. Timsit and Viser, "A Timeline of Biden's Secretive Trip into and out of Kyiv"; Annie Tomasini, email to author, October 9, 2025.
35. "Remarks by President Biden Ahead of the One-Year Anniversary of Russia's Brutal and Unprovoked Invasion of Ukraine," *Biden White House*, February 21, 2023, https://bidenwhitehouse.archives.gov/briefing-room/speeches-remarks/2023/02/21/remarks-by-president-biden-ahead-of-the-one-year-anniversary-of-russias-brutal-and-unprovoked-invasion-of-ukraine/.
36. "Remarks by President Biden Ahead of the One-Year Anniversary," *Biden White House*.
37. Siddiqui, "'How Will I Pump?'"

## CHAPTER TWELVE: OCTOBER 7

1. Afaq Hussain and Nicholas Shafer, "The India-Middle East-Europe Economic Corridor: Connectivity in an Era of Geopolitical Uncertainty," Atlantic Council, August 27, 2025, https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/in-depth-research-reports/report/the-india-middle-east-europe-economic-corridor-connectivity-in-an-era-of-geopolitical-uncertainty/; Nandita Bose, "US, India, Saudi, EU Unveil Rail, Ports Deal on G20 Sidelines," Reuters, September 9, 2023, https://www.reuters.com/world/us-india-saudi-eu-unveil-rail-ports-deal-g20-sidelines-white-house-official-2023-09-09/.
2. Joe Biden, "Why I'm Going to Saudi Arabia," *Washington Post*, July 9, 2022, https://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/2022/07/09/joe-biden-saudi-arabia-israel-visit/.
3. "Full Text: Yair Lapid and Joe Biden Deliver Remarks, Answer Questions in Jerusalem," *Times of Israel*, July 15, 2022, https://www.timesofisrael.com/full-text-yair-lapid-and-joe-biden-deliver-remarks-answer-questions-in-jerusalem/.
4. President Biden Archived (@POTUS46Archive), "I welcome @IsraeliPM Lapid's courageous statement at the UN General Assembly: 'An agreement with the Palestinians, based on two states for two peoples, is the right thing for Israel's security, for Israel's economy, and for the future of our children. I could not agree more," X, September 22, 2022, https://x.com/POTUS46Archive/status/1573043340773294083.
5. Brett McGurk, conversation with author, December 12, 2025.
6. "Biden: Upcoming Flight from Israel to Saudi Arabia a 'Small Symbol' of Warming Ties," *Times of Israel*, July 10, 2022, https://www.timesofisrael.com/biden-upcoming-flight-from-israel-to-saudi-arabia-a-small-symbol-of-warming-ties/.
7. Kyle Blaine and Eliza Mackintosh, "Saudi Arabia Opens Airspace to Israeli Flights," *CNN*, July 15, 2022, https://www.cnn.com/2022/07/15/middleeast/saudi-arabia-israeli-airlines-airspace-biden-intl.
8. Abigail Ng, "Jordan's King Says He Would Support a Middle East Version of NATO," *CNBC*, June 24, 2022, https://www.cnbc.com/2022/06/24/jordans-king-says-he-would-support-a-middle-east-version-of-nato.html.



9780316598484_PromiseMeAmerica_int_1P.indd 432 7/17/26 1:51 PM

9. Isabel Kershner, "Amnesty International Accuses Hamas of War Crimes in 2023 Attack on Israel," *New York Times*, December 11, 2025, https://www.nytimes.com/2025/12/11/world/middleeast/amnesty-international-hamas-war-crimes-israel.html.
10. Thomas L. Friedman, "What Is Happening to Our World?," *New York Times*, December 29, 2023, https://www.nytimes.com/2023/12/29/opinion/israel-hamas-war.html; Peter Baker, "In Unforgiving Terms, Biden Condemns 'Evil' and 'Abhorrent' Attack on Israel," *New York Times*, October 10, 2023; https://www.nytimes.com/2023/10/10/us/politics/biden-israel-hamas.html.
11. Amos Hochstein, conversation with author, December 4, 2025.
12. Thomas L. Friedman, "What in the World Is Happening in Israel?," *New York Times*, December 15, 2022, https://www.nytimes.com/2022/12/15/opinion/israel-palestinians-arabs-jews.html; Barak Ravid, "Netanyahu Unites Jewish Supremacist Parties Ahead of November's Election," *Axios*, August 31, 2022, https://www.axios.com/2022/08/31/netanyahu-supremacist-groups-unite-election-israel.
13. Martin S. Indyk, "In Israel, Why Netanyahu Humiliated Biden," *Brookings*, March 12, 2010, https://www.brookings.edu/articles/in-israel-why-netanyahu-humiliated-biden/.
14. Thomas L. Friedman, "Putin and Netanyahu Show Why Bad Things Happen to Bad Leaders," *New York Times*, March 14, 2023, https://www.nytimes.com/2023/03/14/opinion/benjamin-netanyahu-israel-putin-russia.html.
15. "US 'Deeply Troubled' by Israel's Approval of Settler Building Permits," Reuters, June 26, 2023, https://www.reuters.com/world/middle-east/israel-approves-thousands-building-permits-west-bank-2023-06-26/.
16. "Remarks by President Biden at a Campaign Reception," *Biden White House*, December 12, 2023, https://bidenwhitehouse.archives.gov/briefing-room/speeches-remarks/2023/12/12/remarks-by-president-biden-at-a-campaign-reception-5/.
17. Jarrod Bernstein, "In the Heart of Motor City, Vice President Biden Addresses Yeshiva Beth Yehuda," *Obama White House*, November 18, 2011, https://obamawhitehouse.archives.gov/blog/2011/11/18/heart-motor-city-vice-president-biden-addresses-yeshiva-beth-yehuda.
18. Scott Pelley, "President Joe Biden: The 2023 60 Minutes Interview Transcript," *CBS News*, October 15, 2023, https://www.cbsnews.com/news/president-joe-biden-2023-60-minutes-transcript/; Johannes Göbel, "Remembering the Horror," *Deutschland.de*, March 3, 2021, https://www.deutschland.de/en/topic/knowledge/dachau-joe-biden-and-his-relationship-with-the-concentration-camp-memorial-site.
19. Bethan McKernan and Ruth Michaelson, "US Deploys Second Aircraft Carrier as Israeli Ground Invasion of Gaza Nears," *Guardian*, October 15, 2023, https://www.theguardian.com/world/2023/oct/15/gaza-ground-invasion-israel-us-second-carrier-group-hamas; Amos Hochstein, conversation with author, December 4, 2025.
20. Pelley, "President Joe Biden: The 2023 60 Minutes Interview Transcript."
21. Helen Sullivan et al., "Iran Warns of 'Pre-Emptive Action' as Gaza Ground Assault Looms—As It Happened," *Guardian*, October 16, 2023, https://www.theguardian.com/world/live/2023/oct/16/israel-hamas-war-live-update-news-today-gaza-water-fuel-aid-egypt-border-rafah-crossing-latest-updates.
22. Patrick Kingsley et al., "U.S. Says Israel Didn't Cause Hospital Blast, as Biden Promises Aid to Gaza," *New York Times*, October 18, 2023, https://www.nytimes.com/2023/10/18/world/middleeast/biden-israel-gaza-hospital.html; Anthony Blinken, email to author, March 19, 2026.
23. Tamara Keith, "Biden Says His Tel Aviv Trip Was a Gamble. Thursday, He Has Another

High-Stakes Moment," *Oregon Public Broadcasting*, October 19, 2023, https://www.opb.org/article/2023/10/19/biden-israel-oval-office-speech/.

24. "Statement from President Joe Biden on the Hospital Explosion in Gaza," *Biden White House*, October 17, 2023, https://bidenwhitehouse.archives.gov/briefing-room/statements-releases/2023/10/17/statement-from-president-joe-biden-on-the-hospital-explosion-in-gaza/.
25. Heib Keinon and Nathan Guttman, "Israel Mum on PA Election Results," *Jerusalem Post*, January 26, 2006, https://www.jpost.com/israel/israel-mum-on-pa-election-results/article-11238.
26. Zachary B. Wolf, "When Joe Biden Met Golda Meir, It Was a Much Different Time of Unrest," *CNN*, October 18, 2023, https://www.cnn.com/2023/10/18/politics/golda-meir-joe-biden-what-matters; "Biden Golda Meir Story 1992," *C-SPAN*, April 6, 1992, https://www.c-span.org/clip/public-affairs-event/biden-golda-meir-story-1992/4898776; "Remarks by Vice President Joe Biden the 67th Annual Israeli Independence Day Celebration," *Obama White House*, April 23, 2015, https://obamawhitehouse.archives.gov/the-press-office/2015/04/23/remarks-vice-president-joe-biden-67th-annual-israeli-independence-day-ce/.
27. "Biden Lands in Israel, Hugs Netanyahu and Herzog on Tarmac," Reuters, October 18, 2023, https://www.reuters.com/world/biden-lands-israel-consult-gaza-war-2023-10-18/.
28. David Makovsky, "The Trust Biden Built with Israelis Doesn't Come with a Blank Check," Washington Institute for Near East Policy, October 13, 2023, https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/trust-biden-built-israelis-doesnt-come-blank-check.
29. "Remarks by President Biden on the October 7th Terrorist Attacks and the Resilience of the State of Israel and Its People | Tel Aviv, Israel," *Biden White House*, October 18, 2023, https://bidenwhitehouse.archives.gov/briefing-room/speeches-remarks/2023/10/18/remarks-by-president-biden-on-the-october-7th-terrorist-attacks-and-the-resilience-of-the-state-of-israel-and-its-people-tel-aviv-israel/.
30. Kingsley et al., "U.S. Says Israel Didn't Cause Hospital Blast, as Biden Promises Aid to Gaza"; Peter Baker, "In Tel Aviv, Biden's Embrace of Israel Came with a Gentle Warning," *New York Times*, October 18, 2023, https://www.nytimes.com/2023/10/18/world/middleeast/biden-israel-visit-gaza-hospital-strike.html; Rachel Treisman, "U.S. Announces $100 Million in Humanitarian Aid for Palestinians," NPR, October 18, 2023, https://www.npr.org/live-updates/biden-israel-gaza-hamas-palestine#u-s-announces-100-million-in-humanitarian-aid-for-palestinians.
31. Keith, "Biden Says His Tel Aviv Trip Was a Gamble. Thursday, He Has Another High-Stakes Moment."
32. Vanessa Romo and Deepa Shivaram, "Biden Appeals for More Funding for Ukraine and Israel in Rare Oval Office Address," NPR, October 19, 2023, https://www.npr.org/2023/10/19/1207093094/biden-is-giving-an-oval-office-address-to-push-for-more-spending-on-israel-and-u; "Full Transcript: Biden's Speech on Israel-Hamas and Russia-Ukraine Wars," *New York Times*, October 19, 2023, https://www.nytimes.com/2023/10/19/us/politics/transcript-biden-speech-israel-ukraine.html; "What They Are Saying: President Biden Gives Oval Office Address on the United States' Response to Hamas' Terrorist Attacks Against Israel and Russia's Ongoing Brutal War Against Ukraine," *Biden White House*, October 20, 2023, https://bidenwhitehouse.archives.gov/briefing-room/statements-releases/2023/10/20/what-they-are-saying-president-biden-gives-oval-office-address-on-the-united-states-response-to-hamas-terrorist-attacks-against-israel-and-russias-ongoing-brutal-war-against-ukrai/.
33. Jonathan Reiss, "A Ghostly Life for Those Trickling Back to Villages Attacked on Oct.

7," *New York Times*, October 6, 2024, https://www.nytimes.com/2024/10/06/world/middleeast/israel-villages-hamas-oct-7-return.html.

34. Patrick Kingsley, "Israel and Hamas Agree to Cease-Fire in Exchange for Hostage Release," *New York Times*, November 21, 2023, https://www.nytimes.com/2023/11/21/world/middleeast/israel-hamas-prisoners-deal.html; Jason Burke, Ruth Michaelson, and Julian Borger, "Israel and Hamas Agree Deal for Release of Some Hostages and Four-Day Ceasefire," *Guardian*, November 22, 2023, https://www.theguardian.com/world/2023/nov/22/israel-hamas-war-hostages-freed-deal-ceasefire.
35. "Israel-Hamas War: The Hostage Deal and Ceasefire Explained," Reuters, November 27, 2023, https://www.reuters.com/world/middle-east/israelhamas-war-hostage-deal-ceasefire-gaza-2023-11-22/.

## CHAPTER THIRTEEN: A SUMMIT IN SAN FRANCISCO

1. John Dickerson, *The Hardest Job in the World: The American Presidency* (Random House, 2020), xviii.
2. Worldometer, "GDP by Country (2026)," April 2026, https://www.worldometers.info/gdp/gdp-by-country/.
3. World Population Review, "Patents by Country 2026," 2026, https://worldpopulationreview.com/country-rankings/patents-by-country.
4. Rick Gladstone, "Trump Demands U.N. Hold China to Account for Coronavirus Pandemic," *New York Times*, September 22, 2020, https://www.nytimes.com/2020/09/22/world/americas/UN-Trump-Xi-China-coronavirus.html.
5. Rush Doshi, *The Long Game: China's Grand Strategy to Displace American Order* (Oxford University Press, 2021), 269.
6. Kurt M. Campbell and Rush Doshi, "Underestimating China: Why America Needs a New Strategy of Allied Scale to Offset Beijing's Enduring Advantages," *Foreign Affairs*, April 10, 2025, https://www.foreignaffairs.com/china/underestimating-china; Dan Wang and Arthur Kroeber, "The Real China Model: Beijing's Enduring Formula for Wealth and Power," *Foreign Affairs*, August 19, 2025, https://www.foreignaffairs.com/china/real-china-model-wang-kroeber.
7. Campbell and Doshi, "Underestimating China."
8. Ryan Hass and Abraham Denmark, "More Pain Than Gain: How the US-China Trade War Hurt America," *Brookings*, August 7, 2020, https://www.brookings.edu/articles/more-pain-than-gain-how-the-us-china-trade-war-hurt-america/.
9. Zongyuan Zoe Liu and Inu Manak, "The U.S.-China Trade Relationship: What's Behind the Competition?," Council on Foreign Relations, May 15, 2026, https://www.cfr.org/backgrounders/contentious-us-china-trade-relationship; Hass and Denmark, "More Pain Than Gain"; Heather Long, "Was Trump's China Trade War Worth It?," *Washington Post*, January 15, 2020, https://www.washingtonpost.com/business/2020/01/15/was-trumps-china-trade-war-worth-it/.
10. "Countries of the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI)," Green Finance and Development Center, 2021, https://greenfdc.org/countries-of-the-belt-and-road-initiative-bri/.
11. Georgina Gustin, "A Massive, Chinese-Backed Port in Peru Could Push the Amazon Rainforest over the Edge," *Inside Climate News*, December 1, 2025, https://insideclimatenews.org/news/01122025/china-port-in-peru-impact-on-amazon-rainforest/.
12. Agnes Chang and Hannah Beech, "The Chinese Base That Isn't There," *New York Times*, July 14, 2024, https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2024/07/14/world/asia/china-cambodia-military-warship-base.html.



9780316598484_PromiseMeAmerica_int_1P.indd 435 7/17/26 1:51 PM

13. Simeon Tegel, "Inside the Chinese Mega-Port Built in America's Backyard," *Telegraph* (UK), September 24, 2024, https://www.telegraph.co.uk/world-news/2024/09/24/chinese-mega-port-peru-belt-and-road-initiative/.
14. Yaroslav Trofimov, "Has World War III Already Begun?," *Wall Street Journal*, December 13, 2024, https://www.wsj.com/world/has-world-war-iii-already-begun-16fb94c9.
15. Keith Bradsher and Austin Ramzy, "Demanding Loyalty, China Moves to Overhaul Hong Kong Elections," *New York Times*, March 4, 2021, https://www.nytimes.com/2021/03/04/world/asia/china-hong-kong-election-law.html.
16. Demetri Sevastopulo, Tom Mitchell, and Primrose Riordan, "China Passes Hong Kong Election Law Despite US Warning," *Financial Times*, March 11, 2021, https://www.ft.com/content/b96d1e82-e693-4d62-bcf6-089e6c1c8cf2.
17. Lara Jakes and Steven Lee Myers, "Tense Talks with China Left U.S. 'Cleareyed' About Beijing's Intentions, Officials Say," *New York Times*, March 19, 2021, https://www.nytimes.com/2021/03/19/world/asia/china-us-alaska.html.
18. Joe Biden, "Why America Must Lead Again," *Foreign Affairs*, January 23, 2020, https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/united-states/2020-01-23/why-america-must-lead-again.
19. Campbell and Doshi, "Underestimating China."
20. Gordon Lubold and Alex Leary, "Biden Meets World Leaders in Quest for More Covid-19 Vaccine," *Wall Street Journal*, March 12, 2021, https://www.wsj.com/world/asia/biden-meets-world-leaders-in-a-quest-for-more-vaccine-11615527000.
21. "Joint Statement from Quad Leaders," *Biden White House*, September 24, 2021, https://bidenwhitehouse.archives.gov/briefing-room/statements-releases/2021/09/24/joint-statement-from-quad-leaders/.
22. Shanker, Tom, "Senate Approves Nuclear Cooperation with India," *New York Times*, November 16, 2006, https://www.nytimes.com/2006/11/16/washington/16cnd-nuke.html.
23. Campbell and Sullivan, "The Case for a U.S. Alliance with India"; "U.S., India to Collaborate on Mars Exploration, Earth-Observing Mission," NASA; "5 Things to Know About Powerful New U.S.-India Satellite, NISAR," NASA Jet Propulsion Laboratory.
24. "Aukus: China Denounces US-UK-Australia Pact as Irresponsible," *BBC*, September 16, 2021, https://www.bbc.com/news/world-58582573.
25. Choe Sang-Hun, "Historical Disputes Kept Them at Odds. Can Seoul and Tokyo Make Amends?," *New York Times*, March 5, 2023, https://www.nytimes.com/2023/03/05/world/asia/south-korea-japan-forced-labor.html.
26. Anne Gearan and Simon Denyer, "Biden Hosts Japan's Suga as First Foreign Leader at the White House," *Washington Post*, April 16, 2021, https://www.washingtonpost.com/politics/biden-hosts-japans-suga-as-first-foreign-leader-at-the-white-house/2021/04/15/cd56f946-9e1a-11eb-b7a8-014b14aeb9e4_story.html.
27. Eli Stokols, "Biden Appoints New North Korean Envoy After Meeting with South Korean President," *Los Angeles Times*, May 21, 2021, https://www.latimes.com/politics/story/2021-05-21/biden-and-south-koreas-president-moon-jae-in-meet-at-white-house.
28. Peter Baker and David E. Sanger, "In Turn to Deterrence, Biden Vows 'End' of North Korean Regime If It Attacks," *New York Times*, April 26, 2023, https://www.nytimes.com/2023/04/26/us/politics/biden-south-korea-state-visit.html.
29. Peter Baker, "Biden Welcomes Japanese and South Korean Leaders to Camp David Summit," *New York Times*, August 18, 2023, https://www.nytimes.com/2023/08/18/us/politics/biden-japan-south-korea-sum.html.
30. Jacob Poushter, "A World in Tumult? Changing Views of the United States," Pew Research



9780316598484_PromiseMeAmerica_int_1P.indd 436 7/17/26 1:51 PM

9780316598484_PromiseMeAmerica_int_1P.indd 436 7/17/26 1:51 PM



Center, October 19, 2021, https://www.atlantik-bruecke.org/wp-content/uploads/Pew-Research-Center-Atlantik-Bru%CC%88cke-October-9-2021-FINAL.pdf.

31. Richard Wike et al., "Overall Opinion of the U.S.," Pew Research Center, June 27, 2023, https://www.pewresearch.org/global/2023/06/27/overall-opinion-of-the-u-s/; Helen Davidson, "Biden Pledges to Defend Philippines from Any Attack in South China Sea," *Guardian*, April 11, 2024, https://www.theguardian.com/world/2024/apr/12/joe-biden-philippines-attack-defence-meeting-japan-south-china-sea; "U.S. Pacific Island Country Summit," U.S. Department of State, 2022, https://2021-2025.state.gov/u-s-pacific-islands-country-summit/.
32. "Stand with Ukraine," *JapanGov*, accessed 2026, https://www.japan.go.jp/topics/Stand_with_Ukraine.html; Campbell and Doshi, "Underestimating China."
33. Dan Milmo, "ChatGPT Reaches 100 Million Users Two Months After Launch," *Guardian*, February 2, 2023, https://www.theguardian.com/technology/2023/feb/02/chatgpt-100-million-users-open-ai-fastest-growing-app; Stephen Witt, "The Race to Build the World's Best Friend," *New York Times*, December 20, 2025, https://www.nytimes.com/2025/12/20/opinion/ai-chat-gpt-models-personality.html.
34. "President Biden Delivers Remarks on Artificial Intelligence," livestreamed July 21, 2023, by The Biden White House, YouTube, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tg2FNynmToM; "President Biden Remarks on Artificial Intelligence," *C-SPAN*, October 30, 2023, https://www.c-span.org/program/public-affairs-event/president-biden-remarks-on-artificial-intelligence/634364; "Remarks by President Biden on Seizing the Opportunities and Managing the Risks of Artificial Intelligence," *Biden White House*, June 20, 2023, https://bidenwhitehouse.archives.gov/briefing-room/speeches-remarks/2023/06/20/remarks-by-president-biden-on-seizing-the-opportunities-and-managing-the-risks-of-artificial-intelligence/.
35. Emily Benson, "Updated October 7 Semiconductor Export Controls," Center for Strategic and International Studies, October 18, 2023, https://www.csis.org/analysis/updated-october-7-semiconductor-export-controls.
36. David E. Sanger, *New Cold Wars: China's Rise, Russia's Invasion, and America's Struggle to Defend the West* (Crown, 2024), 287.
37. Richard Elkus Jr., "A Strategy for the United States to Regain Its Position in Semiconductor Manufacturing," Center for Strategic and International Studies, February 13, 2024, https://www.csis.org/analysis/strategy-united-states-regain-its-position-semiconductor-manufacturing.
38. Tripp Mickle, "The Looming Taiwan Chip Disaster That Silicon Valley Has Long Ignored," *New York Times*, February 24, 2026, https://www.nytimes.com/2026/02/24/technology/taiwan-china-chips-silicon-valley-tsmc.html.
39. Sanger, *New Cold Wars*, 284–85; Zolan Kanno-Youngs and Peter Baker, "Biden Pledges to Defend Taiwan If It Faces a Chinese Attack," *New York Times*, May 23, 2022, https://www.nytimes.com/2022/05/23/world/asia/biden-taiwan-china.html.
40. David Sacks and Adam Segal, "Unpacking TMSC's $100 Billion Investment in the United States," Center on Foreign Relations, March 4, 2025, https://www.cfr.org/blog/unpacking-tsmcs-100-billion-investment-united-states.
41. Dario Amodei, "Machines of Loving Grace: How AI Could Transform the World for the Better," *Dario Amodei*, October 2024, https://www.darioamodei.com/essay/machines-of-loving-grace.
42. Sanger, *New Cold Wars*, 337–38.
43. Witt, "The Race to Build the World's Best Friend."

44. "Unpacking the White House Blueprint for an AI Bill of Rights," *Brookings*, December 5, 2022, https://www.brookings.edu/events/unpacking-the-white-house-blueprint-for-an-ai-bill-of-rights/; Kay Firth-Butterfield, Karen Silverman, and Benjamin Larsen, "Understanding the US 'AI Bill of Rights'—and How It Can Help Keep AI Accountable," World Economic Forum, October 14, 2022, https://www.weforum.org/stories/2022/10/understanding-the-ai-bill-of-rights-protection/; Science and Technology Policy Office, "Blueprint for an Ai Bill of Rights: Making Automated Systems Work for the American People," *Govinfo*, 2022, https://www.govinfo.gov/app/details/GOVPUB-PREX23-PURL-gpo193638.
45. Michael D. Shear, Cecelia Kang, and David E. Sanger, "Pressured by Biden, A.I. Companies Agree to Guardrails on New Tools," *New York Times*, July 21, 2023, https://www.nytimes.com/2023/07/21/us/politics/ai-regulation-biden.html.
46. "Fact Sheet: President Biden Issues Executive Order on Safe, Secure, and Trustworthy Artificial Intelligence," *Biden White House*, October 30, 2023, https://bidenwhitehouse.archives.gov/briefing-room/statements-releases/2023/10/30/fact-sheet-president-biden-issues-executive-order-on-safe-secure-and-trustworthy-artificial-intelligence/; Kevin Roose, "With Executive Order, White House Tries to Balance A.I.'s Potential and Peril," *New York Times*, October 31, 2023, https://www.nytimes.com/2023/10/31/technology/executive-order-artificial-intelligence-regulation.html.
47. Doshi, *The Long Game*, 2, 261, 265.
48. Henry Kissinger, *On China* (Penguin Press, 2011), 28.
49. Benjamin Blandin, "What does China want in its near seas? Want in the SCS?" *KIMS Periscope* No. 358 (August 21, 2024).
50. Steve Holland, Michael Martina, and Ryan Woo, "Don't 'Play with Fire' over Taiwan, China's Xi Warns in Call with Biden," Reuters, July 29, 2022, https://www.reuters.com/world/biden-looks-tamp-down-taiwan-tension-during-china-xi-call-2022-07-28/.
51. "Statement by China's Ministry of Foreign Affairs on Pelosi's Visit to Taiwan," Embassy of the People's Republic of China in the United States of America, August 2, 2022, https://us.china-embassy.gov.cn/eng/zmgx/zxxx/202208/t20220802_10732305.htm.
52. Daniel W. Drezner, "Why Kissinger Went to China," *Politico*, July 22, 2023, https://www.politico.com/news/magazine/2023/07/22/why-kissinger-went-to-china-again-00107676.
53. Jonathan D. Spence, *The Search for Modern China* (W.W. Norton, 1990), 212–15.
54. Katie Rogers and David E. Sanger, "Biden and Xi Meet at a Backdrop for Hollywood and Tech-Titan Weddings," *New York Times*, November 15, 2023, https://www.nytimes.com/2023/11/15/us/politics/filoli-estate-summit-biden-xi.html.
55. David Pierson, Ana Swanson, and David E. Sanger, "A Rare Opportunity to See China's Leader Up Close and (Sort of) Personal," *New York Times*, November 17, 2023, https://www.nytimes.com/2023/11/17/world/asia/xi-jinping-biden-apec.html.
56. Mike Wendling, "Xi Jinping: Chinese Leader's Surprising Ties to Rural Iowa," *BBC*, November 15, 2023, https://www.bbc.com/news/world-us-canada-67411188; "Xi Jinping and His Four-Decade Bond with Iowan Friends," English.gov.cn, February 5, 2025, https://english.www.gov.cn/news/202502/05/content_WS67a30fbcc6d0868f4e8ef5de.html.
57. Pierson, Swanson, and Sanger, "A Rare Opportunity to See China's Leader Up Close and (Sort of) Personal."
58. Doshi, *The Long Game*, 137.
59. Anne Neuberger, "China Is Winning the Cyberwar: America Needs a New Strategy of Deterrence," *Foreign Affairs*, August 13, 2025, https://www.foreignaffairs.com/china/china-winning-cyberwar-artificial-intelligence.



9780316598484_PromiseMeAmerica_int_1P.indd 438 7/17/26 1:51 PM

60. Center for Preventive Action, "Territorial Disputes in the South China Sea," Global Conflict Tracker, Council on Foreign Relations, September 17, 2024, https://www.cfr.org/global-conflict-tracker/conflict/territorial-disputes-south-china-sea.
61. "South China Sea Oil Shipping Lanes," Globalsecurity.org, November 7, 2011, https://www.globalsecurity.org/military/world/war/spratly-ship.htm; Agnes Chang and Hannah Beech, "Fleets of Force," *New York Times*, November 16, 2023, https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2023/11/16/world/asia/south-china-sea-ships.html.
62. Brian Mann, "How Biden Made Big Gains Battling Street Fentanyl but Lost the Messaging War to Trump," *All Things Considered*, NPR, January 8, 2026, https://www.npr.org/2026/01/08/nx-s1-5661523/biden-made-big-gains-battling-street-fentanyl-lost-messaging-war-trump.
63. Mark S. Gold, "'Shock' in Fentanyl Supply Leads to Dramatic Drop in Deaths," *Psychology Today*, January 14, 2026, https://www.psychologytoday.com/us/blog/addiction-outlook/202601/shock-in-fentanyl-supply-leads-to-dramatic-drop-in-deaths.
64. David E. Sanger and Katie Rogers, "Biden-Xi Talks Lead to Little but a Promise to Keep Talking," *New York Times*, November 15, 2023, https://www.nytimes.com/2023/11/15/us/politics/biden-xi-meeting-apec-china.html.
65. "Arms Control and Proliferation Profile: China," Arms Control Association, March 2025, https://www.armscontrol.org/factsheets/arms-control-and-proliferation-profile-china; Sanger and Rogers, "Biden-Xi Talks Lead to Little but a Promise to Keep Talking."
66. Sanger and Rogers, "Biden-Xi Talks Lead to Little but a Promise to Keep Talking"; Katie Rogers, "Car Talk and Birthday Wishes Punctuate Biden's 'Trust but Verify' Diplomacy," *New York Times*, November 16, 2023, https://www.nytimes.com/2023/11/16/us/politics/biden-xi-china-apec-meeting.html; Nectar Gan and Juliana Liu, "China Is Willing to Be a 'Partner and Friend' of the US, Xi Tells American CEOs," *CNN*, November 16, 2023, https://www.cnn.com/2023/11/16/business/china-us-xi-dinner-ceo-intl-hnk/index.html.
67. Sanger and Rogers, "Biden-Xi Talks Lead to Little but a Promise to Keep Talking."
68. Pierson, Swanson, and Sanger, "A Rare Opportunity to See China's Leader Up Close and (Sort of) Personal."
69. Gan and Liu, "China Is Willing to Be a 'Partner and Friend' of the US"; Pierson, Swanson, and Sanger, "A Rare Opportunity to See China's Leader Up Close and (Sort of) Personal"; Edward Wong, "Panda Diplomacy Might Not Be Dead Just Yet," *New York Times*, November 16, 2023, https://www.nytimes.com/2023/11/16/us/politics/pandas-china-xi-jinping.html.
70. John F. Kennedy, "Address at Rice University on the Nation's Space Effort" (September 12, 1962), Rice University, accessed 2022, https://www.rice.edu/jfk-speech; Ezra Klein, "The Government Knows A.G.I. Is Coming," *New York Times*, March 4, 2025, https://www.nytimes.com/2025/03/04/opinion/ezra-klein-podcast-ben-buchanan.html.
71. Doshi, *The Long Game*, 262, 272–73, 312.
72. Kissinger, *On China*, 43.
73. Christopher S. Chivvis et al., "U.S.-China Relations for the 2030s: Toward a Realistic Scenario for Coexistence," Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, October 17, 2024, https://carnegieendowment.org/research/2024/10/us-china-relations-for-the-2030s-toward-a-realistic-scenario-for-coexistence.
74. Campbell and Doshi, "Underestimating China."

## CHAPTER FOURTEEN: SACRED CAUSE

1. "Full Transcript of Biden's State of the Union Address," *New York Times*, February 8, 2023, https://www.nytimes.com/2023/02/08/us/politics/biden-state-of-the-union-transcript.html.



9780316598484_PromiseMeAmerica_int_1P.indd 439 7/17/26 1:51 PM

## NOTES


2. Aaron Kliegman, "Dems Praise Biden's State of the Union Address as 'Masterful,' 'Inspiring' Despite Backlash from GOP," *Fox News*, February 8, 2023, https://www.foxnews.com/politics/dems-praise-bidens-state-union-masterful-inspiring-backlash-gop.
3. "2023 U.S. Legislative Conference: Remarks by NABTU President Sean McGarvey," posted April 25, 2023, by The Building Trades, YouTube, https://youtu.be/cRFUa7_4oB4?si=VOpwM9KbhAPP0BoE.
4. Edward-Isaac Dovere, "Biden Scores Major Union Backing as Its Leaders Attack Trump," *CNN*, April 24, 2024, https://www.cnn.com/2024/04/23/politics/biden-building-trades-union-endorsement.
5. Elizabeth Brotherton-Bunch, "President Biden Reaffirms His Commitment to Made in America Infrastucture," Alliance for American Manufacturing, April 25, 2023, https://www.americanmanufacturing.org/blog/president-biden-reaffirms-his-commitment-to-made-in-america-infrastructure-including-construction-materials/.
6. "Matt Gaetz: President Biden continues to take Speaker McCarthy's lunch money," posted October 2, 2023, by Heartland Signal, YouTube, https://youtu.be/k2TXE-C3ovM?si=RpBVFHzOSsAVGNZ0.
7. Rex Huppke, "Marjorie Taylor Greene compares Biden to FDR, LBJ> Thanks for the free campaign ad!", *USA Today*, July 17, 2023, https://www.usatoday.com/story/opinion/columnist/2023/07/17/marjorie-taylor-greene-biden-speech-highlights-medicare-medicaid/70418859007/.
8. George Washington, "General Orders Book 2, Leaf," *Library of Congress*, accessed 2026, https://www.loc.gov/resource/mgw3g.002/?sp=231.
9. Tom Jackman, "Police Union Says 140 Officers Injured in Capitol Riot," *Washington Post*, January 27, 2021, https://www.washingtonpost.com/local/public-safety/police-union-says-140-officers-injured-in-capitol-riot/2021/01/27/60743642-60e2-11eb-9430-e7c77b5b0297_story.html.
10. Farnoush Amiri, "Capitol Officer Recounts Jan. 6 'War Scene' in Her Testimony," *AP News*, June 10, 2022, https://apnews.com/article/capitol-siege-government-and-politics-riots-d690e70ac850d8652b82c0c3e2fba5bf.
11. Ginger Gibson, "'Trump Says Immigrants Are 'Poisoning the Blood of Our Country.' Biden Campaign Likens Comments to Hitler," *NBC News*, December 17, 2023, https://www.nbcnews.com/politics/2024-election/trump-says-immigrants-are-poisoning-blood-country-biden-campaign-liken-rcna130141.
12. "Former President Trump Holds Rally in Waco, Texas," C-SPAN, March 25, 2023, https://www.c-span.org/program/campaign-2024/former-president-trump-holds-rally-in-waco-texas/625539.
13. Sam Goldfarb and Anthony DeBarros, "'Envy of the World'—U.S. Economy Expected to Keep Powering Higher," *Wall Street Journal*, April 14, 2024, https://www.wsj.com/economy/central-banking/economy-forecast-lower-recession-chances-1f24174b.
14. Colleen Long, Zeke Miller, and Darlene Superville, "Watch: Biden Condemns 'Poison' of White Supremacy in Campaign Speech at South Carolina Church," PBS, January 8, 2024, https://www.pbs.org/newshour/politics/watch-live-biden-speaks-at-church-in-south-carolina-where-black-congregants-killed-in-racist-attack.
15. Bridget Bowman and Jake Traylor, "Dean Phillips Says Biden Should 'Hand the Torch' in New Ad," *NBC News*, October 27, 2023, https://www.nbcnews.com/meet-the-press/meetthepressblog/phillips-says-biden-hand-torch-new-ad-rcna122536.
16. "Democratic Presidential Primaries and Caucuses 2024," CNN, 2024, https://www.cnn.com/election/2024/primaries-and-caucuses/results/democratic-party/president.




9780316598484_PromiseMeAmerica_int_1P.indd 440 7/17/26 1:51 PM

17. Editorial Board, "The Democrats' Best Choices for President," *New York Times*, January 19, 2020, https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2020/01/19/opinion/amy-klobuchar-elizabeth-warren-nytimes-endorsement.html.
18. Robert Hur, *Report of the Special Counsel on the Investigation into Unauthorized Removal, Retention, and Disclosure of Classified Documents Discovered at Locations Including the Penn Biden Center and the Delaware Private Residence of President Joseph R. Biden, Jr.* (U.S. Department of Justice, February 5, 2024), https://www.justice.gov/storage/report-from-special-counsel-robert-k-hur-february-2024.pdf.
19. Lara Jakes, "Aid to Ukraine Is on the Way. Here's How It Might Help," *New York Times*, April 24, 2024, https://www.nytimes.com/2024/04/24/world/europe/ukraine-aid-senate.html.
20. "CBP Announces January 2021 Operational Update," U.S. Customs and Border Protection, February 10, 2021, https://www.cbp.gov/newsroom/national-media-release/cbp-announces-january-2021-operational-update; "Southwest Land Border Encounters," U.S. Customs and Border Protection, June 18, 2026, https://www.cbp.gov/newsroom/stats/southwest-land-border-encounters.
21. *A Report on Record-Low Crime During the Biden-Harris Administration* (White House Domestic Policy Council, January 2025), *American Presidency Project*, https://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/sites/default/files/documents_with_attached_files/375870/167952.pdf.
22. U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, "Job Openings: Total Nonfarm," retrieved from FRED, Federal Reserve Bank of St. Louis, June 30, 2026, https://fred.stlouisfed.org/series/JTSJOL.
23. Sahil Kapur and Kate Santaliz, "Senate Republicans Block Border Security Bill as They Campaign on Border Chaos," *NBC News*, May 23, 2024, https://www.nbcnews.com/politics/congress/senate-republicans-block-border-security-bill-campaign-border-chaos-rcna153607.
24. A.G. Order No. 5943-2024, 89 Fed. Reg. 48710 (June 7, 2024), https://www.federalregister.gov/documents/2024/06/07/2024-12435/securing-the-border.
25. Eli Stokols and Eric Bazail-Eimil, "Biden in Normandy Delivers a Wake-Up Call Address to Americans," *Politico*, June 7, 2024, https://www.politico.com/news/2024/06/07/biden-normandy-d-day-speech-00162288.
26. Chris Jackson, "Reuters Ipsos Presidential Debate Survey," Ipsos.com, July 2024, https://www.ipsos.com/sites/default/files/ct/news/documents/2024-07/Reuters%20Ipsos%20Presidential%20Debate%20Topline%2007%2002%202024%20PDF.pdf.
27. Stephen Fowler, "Biden Bounces Back from Bad Debate with Energetic Raleigh Rally," NPR, June 28, 2024, https://www.npr.org/2024/06/28/g-s1-7202/biden-bad-debate-drop-out-raleigh-rally.
28. "2024 General Election: Trump vs. Biden," *RealClear Polling*, 2026, https://www.realclearpolling.com/polls/president/general/2024/trump-vs-biden.
29. Aaron Blake, "What Biden's Downturn in the Polls Means," *Washington Post*, July 12, 2024, https://www.washingtonpost.com/politics/2024/07/12/joe-biden-polls-debate-donald-trump/.
30. Will Weissert and Zeke Miller, "Watch: Biden addresses the nation after receiving briefing on Trump rally shooting," PBS, July 14, 2024, https://www.pbs.org/newshour/politics/watch-live-biden-addresses-the-nation-after-receiving-briefing-on-trump-rally-shooting.
31. Joe Parkinson et al., "Inside the Secret Negotiations to Free Evan Gershkovich," *Wall Street Journal*, August 1, 2024, https://www.wsj.com/world/europe/evan-gershkovich-prisoner-exchange-ccb39ad3.



9780316598484_PromiseMeAmerica_int_1P.indd 441 7/17/26 1:51 PM

32. Joe Biden, "Remarks at the White House Correspondents' Association Dinner," *American Presidency Project*, April 27, 2024, https://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/documents/remarks-the-white-house-correspondents-association-dinner-20.
33. Anton Troianovski and Mark Mazzetti, "Major Inmate Swap Frees Dissidents and U.S. Journalists from Russian Prison," *New York Times*, August 1, 2024, https://www.nytimes.com/2024/08/01/world/europe/russia-gershkovich-prisoner-swap.html; Aamer Madhani and Josh Boak, "Biden thanks Slovenian PM for helping secure Americans' release in major Russia prisoner swap," PBS, October 22, 2024, https://www.pbs.org/newshour/world/biden-thanks-slovenian-pm-for-helping-secure-americans-release-in-major-russia-prisoner-swap.
34. "Read Biden's full letter announcing the end of his 2024 reelection bid," PBS, July 21, 2024, https://www.pbs.org/newshour/politics/read-bidens-full-letter-announcing-the-end-of-his-2024-reelection-bid.

## CHAPTER FIFTEEN: A SPRINT TO THE FINISH

1. "Joe Biden Address to the 79th Session of the United Nations General Assembly delivered 24 September, 2024, United Nations HQ, New York, NY," *American Rhetoric Online Speech Bank*, September 24, 2024, https://www.americanrhetoric.com/speeches/joebidenunga79.htm.
2. Sudiksha Kochi, "AOC Says Many Democrats Who Want Biden to Drop Out Don't Want Harris on the Ticket Either," *USA Today*, July 19, 2024, https://www.usatoday.com/story/news/politics/elections/2024/07/19/aoc-biden-harris-ticket/74467834007/.
3. "Ashley Biden Speaks at 2024 Democratic National Convention," *Rev*, August 20, 2024, https://www.rev.com/transcripts/ashley-biden-speaks-at-2024-democratic-national-convention.
4. Kim Lyons, "Biden to Campaign for Harris in Scranton on Saturday," *Pennsylvania Capital-Star*, October 29, 2024, https://penncapital-star.com/briefs/biden-to-campaign-for-harris-in-scranton-on-saturday/; "Remarks: Joe Biden Addresses Voters at a Carpenter's Union in Scranton, Pennsylvania—November 2, 2024," *Roll Call*, Factbase Transcripts, November 2, 2024, https://rollcall.com/factbase/biden/transcript/joe-biden-remarks-carpenters-union-scranton-pennsylvania-november-2-2024/.
5. "International Longshoremen's Association President Harold J. Daggett Leads His Rank-And-File Members to Landmark Tentative Agreement on ILA Master Contract," International Longshoremen's Association, January 9, 2025, https://ilaunion.org/international-longshoremens-association-president-harold-j-daggett-leads-his-rank-and-file-members-to-landmark-tentative-agreement-on-ila-master-contract/.
6. Elizabeth Dias and Ruth Graham, "Trump's Believers See a Presidency with God on Their Side," *New York Times*, November 7, 2024, https://www.nytimes.com/2024/11/07/us/trump-believers-presidency-god.html.
7. Noah Weiland, "Will Trump Have a New Opening to Repeal Obamacare?," *New York Times*, November 7, 2024, https://www.nytimes.com/2024/11/07/us/politics/trump-aca-obamacare.html.
8. Anton Troianovski and Valerie Hopkins, "Putin Lavishes Praise on Trump, Saying Russia Is 'Open' to Restored Ties," *New York Times*, November 7, 2024, https://www.nytimes.com/2024/11/07/world/europe/trump-putin-russia-ukraine-war.html.
9. Deepa Shivaram, "Biden Urges Americans to 'Bring Down the Temperature,'" NPR, November 7, 2024, https://www.npr.org/2024/11/07/g-s1-33255/biden-speech-2024-election; "Joe Biden Address to the Nation on the 2024 Presidential Election Outcome," *American*



9780316598484_PromiseMeAmerica_int_1P.indd 442 7/17/26 1:51 PM

*Rhetoric*, November 7, 2024, https://www.americanrhetoric.com/speeches/joebiden-2024presidentialelectionoutcome.htm; Michael D. Shear, "Biden Vows a Peaceful Transfer of Power: 'The American Experiment Endures,'" *New York Times*, November 7, 2024, https://www.nytimes.com/2024/11/07/us/politics/biden-trump-transfer-of-power.html.

10. Peter Baker, "As Trump Returns to Power, Allies and Adversaries Expect a Wave of Revenge," *New York Times*, November 10, 2024, https://www.nytimes.com/2024/11/10/us/politics/trump-enemies-prosecution.html.
11. Alan Feuer, "Jan. 6 Defendants Are Already Angling for Pardons from Trump," *New York Times*, November 7, 2024, https://www.nytimes.com/2024/11/07/us/politics/trump-jan-6-pardons.html.
12. "President Biden Remarks at Order of Merit Ceremony in Berlin," *C-SPAN*, October 18, 2024, https://www.c-span.org/program/public-affairs-event/president-biden-remarks-at-order-of-merit-ceremony-in-berlin/650664.
13. Lisa Friedman, "Biden and Environmental Groups Try to Protect Climate Policies from Trump," *New York Times*, November 9, 2024, https://www.nytimes.com/2024/11/09/climate/biden-environmental-groups-climate-policies-trump.html.
14. Lisa Friedman, "Trump's Return Hangs Over U.N. Climate Negotiations," *New York Times*, November 11, 2024, https://www.nytimes.com/2024/11/11/climate/cop29-climate-baku-azerbaijan.html.
15. Kyla Guifoil, "'Trump Posts Word Cloud Boasting Voters Associate 'Revenge' and 'Dictatorship' with a Second Term," *NBC News*, December 27, 2023, https://www.nbcnews.com/politics/2024-election/trump-posts-word-cloud-boasting-voters-associate-revenge-dictatorship-rcna131294; Jackie Calmes, "Trump Promises Vengeance and Power Grabs If He Wins in 2024. Here's the Plan," *Los Angeles Times*, November 9, 2023, https://www.latimes.com/opinion/story/2023-11-09/donald-trump-campaign-2024-insurrection-act-times-siena-college-poll-project-25; David Smith, "Revenge: Analysis of Trump Posts Shows Relentless Focus on Punishing Enemies," *Guardian*, June 2, 2024, https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/article/2024/jun/02/trump-social-media-threats.
16. U.S. Mission Lima, "Readout of President Joe Biden's Meeting with President Xi Jinping of the People's Republic of China," U.S. Embassy in Peru, November 17, 2024, https://pe.usembassy.gov/readout-of-president-joe-bidens-meeting-with-president-xi-jinping-of-the-peoples-republic-of-china/.
17. Diana Roy, "China's Growing Influence in Latin America," Council on Foreign Relations, June 6, 2025, https://www.cfr.org/backgrounders/china-influence-latin-america-argentina-brazil-venezuela-security-energy-bri; Martin Cassinelli and Caroline Costello, "As Biden Bids Farewell, Xi Advances China's Influence in Latin America at the APEC Summit in Peru," Atlantic Council, November 13, 2024, https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/new-atlanticist/biden-xi-at-the-apec-summit-in-peru/; Robert Plummer, "Megaport Opens Up Latin America to Chinese Trade as US Looks On," *BBC*, November 15, 2024, https://www.bbc.com/news/articles/ckg79y3rz1eo.
18. Georgina Gustin, "A Massive, Chinese-Backed Port in Peru Could Push the Amazon Rainforest over the Edge," *Inside Climate News*, December 1, 2025, https://insideclimatenews.org/news/01122025/china-port-in-peru-impact-on-amazon-rainforest/.
19. Asma Khalid, "Biden Marks His Climate Legacy During Amazon Visit, Asserting 'Nobody' Can Reverse It," *All Things Considered*, NPR, November 17, 2024, https://www.npr.org/2024/11/17/nx-s1-5191837/biden-amazon-rainforest-climate-trump; "Biden Will Visit the Amazon Rainforest as Part of Six-Day Trip to Latin America," *AP*



9780316598484_PromiseMeAmerica_int_1P.indd 443 7/17/26 1:51 PM

*News*, November 7, 2024, https://apnews.com/article/biden-peru-brazil-g20-apec-rainforest-d430cb932d9ff8c065196c0f8003cbcd.

20. Assaf Orion, "So Far So Good? The Israel-Lebanon Ceasefire Is Largely Holding," Washington Institute for Near East Policy, January 28, 2025, https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/so-far-so-good-israel-lebanon-ceasefire-largely-holding.
21. Edward Paice, "By 2050, a Quarter of the World's People Will Be African—This Will Shape Our Future," *Guardian*, January 20, 2022, https://www.theguardian.com/global-development/2022/jan/20/by-2050-a-quarter-of-the-worlds-people-will-be-african-this-will-shape-our-future; Molly Phee, "President Biden's Historic Trip to Angola," U.S. Department of State, December 18, 2024, https://2021-2025.state.gov/briefings-foreign-press-centers/president-bidens-historic-trip-to-angola/.
22. Zolan Kanno-Youngs and Peter Baker, "In Angola, Biden Warns That Slavery's History Should Not Be Erased," *New York Times*, December 3, 2024, https://www.nytimes.com/2024/12/03/world/africa/angola-biden-slavery.html; John Eligon, "Why Black Americans Searching for Their Roots Should Look to Angola," *New York Times*, December 1, 2024, https://www.nytimes.com/2024/12/01/world/africa/angola-biden-slavery.html; "Remarks by President Biden Honoring the Past and Future of the Angolan-U.S. Relationship," U.S. Embassy in Tanzania, December 5, 2024, https://tz.usembassy.gov/remarks-by-president-biden-honoring-the-past-and-future-of-the-angolan-u-s-relationship/.
23. Amy Gunia, "A Rejuvenated Railway Could Change How Minerals Move in Africa—and Globally," *CNN*, November 4, 2024, https://edition.cnn.com/world/africa/angola-lobito-corridor-railway-impact-spc; Jane Flanagan, Kapiri Mposhi, and Richard Spencer, "Why China and the West Are Locked in Rivalry over Africa's Railways," *Times* (UK), January 2, 2026, https://www.thetimes.com/world/africa/article/china-africa-railway-zambia-tanzania-sqrwrzqv3; Zachary Fillingham, "The Lobito Corridor: Washington's Answer to Belt and Road in Africa," *Geopolitical Monitor*, November 13, 2024, https://www.geopoliticalmonitor.com/the-lobito-corridor-washingtons-answer-to-belt-and-road-in-africa/.
24. "Remarks by President Biden Participating in the Lobito Corridor Trans-Africa Summit | Benguela, Angola," *Biden White House*, December 4, 2024, https://bidenwhitehouse.archives.gov/briefing-room/speeches-remarks/2024/12/04/remarks-by-president-biden-participating-in-the-lobito-corridor-trans-africa-summit-benguela-angola/.
25. Peter Baker and Zolan Kanno-Youngs, "In Global Finale, Biden Hopes Rail Project Defines Africa Legacy," *New York Times*, December 4, 2024, https://www.nytimes.com/2024/12/04/world/africa/biden-angola-africa-lobito-train-corridor.html.
26. Erika Solomon et al., "For Fallen Syrian Dictator Assad and Family, an Exile of Luxury and Impunity," *New York Times*, December 22, 2025, https://www.nytimes.com/2025/12/22/world/middleeast/assad-syria-exile-luxury.html; Ben Hubbard et al., "Deception and Betrayal: Inside the Final Days of the Assad Regime," *New York Times*, December 21, 2024, https://www.nytimes.com/2024/12/21/world/middleeast/assad-regime-syria-final-days.html; Tory Shepherd, "'Delight in Syria': What the Papers Say About the End of the Assad Regime," *Guardian*, December 8, 2024, https://www.theguardian.com/media/2024/dec/09/bashar-al-assad-syria-flee-newspaper-front-page-wrap.
27. Solomon et al., "For Fallen Syrian Dictator Assad and Family, an Exile of Luxury and Impunity."
28. "Remarks by President Biden on His Middle-Out, Bottom-Up Economic Playbook," *Biden White House*, December 10, 2024, https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/speeches-remarks/2024/12/10/remarks-by-president-biden-on-his-middle-out-bottom-up-economic-playbook/;. Joseph Barilla and Glencora Haskins, "The Bidenomics Iinvestment

Bboom in Rred America," *Brookings*, December 11, 2024, https://www.brookings.edu/articles/the-bidenomics-investment-boom-in-red-america/.

29. Darlene Superville, "Biden Honors the Memory of His First Wife and Baby Daughter Who Died in a 1972 Car Crash," *AP News*, December 18, 2024, https://apnews.com/article/biden-memorial-wife-daughter-killed-accident-delaware-a00f53d572a90386a55f206f59c7ff3e.
30. Joe Biden, "Eulogy at a Memorial Service for Ethel Kennedy," *American Presidency Project*, October 16, 2024, https://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/documents/eulogy-memorial-service-for-ethel-kennedy.
31. "President Biden Delivers Remarks at a Christmas for All Dinner," posted December 11, 2024, by Biden White House, YouTube, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=BqY1P5C2qdw.
32. Adam Entous, "6 Takeaways on the Unwinding U.S.-Ukraine Alliance," *New York Times*, December 30, 2025, https://www.nytimes.com/2025/12/30/world/europe/ukraine-us-russia-takeaways.html.
33. Michael D. Shear and Zach Montague, "Biden Awards 18 Medals of Freedom, and Delivers One Unmistakable Message," *New York Times*, January 4, 2025, https://www.nytimes.com/2025/01/04/us/politics/biden-medals-freedom.html; "Remarks by President Biden at Presentation of the Presidential Medal of Freedom," *Biden White House*, January 4, 2025, https://bidenwhitehouse.archives.gov/briefing-room/speeches-remarks/2025/01/04/remarks-by-president-biden-at-presentation-of-the-presidential-medal-of-freedom-3/.
34. Annie Karni, "Four Years After Capitol Riot, Congress Certifies Trump's Victory Peacefully," *New York Times*, January 6, 2025, https://www.nytimes.com/2025/01/06/us/politics/congress-trump-election-certification.html; Michael D. Shear, "Biden Warns Americans Not to Forget the Jan. 6 Attack," *New York Times*, January 6, 2025, https://www.nytimes.com/2025/01/06/us/politics/biden-trump-warnings-jan-6.html; Joe Biden, "What Americans Should Remember About Jan. 6," *Washington Post*, January 6, 2025, https://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/2025/01/05/president-biden-jan-6-democracy/.
35. Lisa Friedman, "Biden Bans New Oil and Gas Drilling Along Most U.S. Coasts," *New York Times*, January 6, 2025, https://www.nytimes.com/2025/01/06/climate/biden-oil-gas-drilling-ban.html.
36. Sam Zeno and Jenny Rowland-Shea, "The Biden Administration Took Record-Breaking Conservation Action," *American Progress*, January 17, 2025, https://www.americanprogress.org/article/the-biden-administration-took-record-breaking-conservation-action/; "What They Are Saying: President Biden Builds on Historic Conservation Legacy, Establishes Chuckwalla and Sáttítla Highlands National Monuments in California," *Biden White House*, January 16, 2025, https://bidenwhitehouse.archives.gov/briefing-room/statements-releases/2025/01/16/what-they-are-saying-president-biden-builds-on-historic-conservation-legacy-establishes-chuckwalla-and-sattitla-highlands-national-monuments-in-california/.
37. Annie Tomasini, email to author, January 11, 2026.
38. Betsy Klein and Donald Judd, "Biden Pledges Federal Support for 'Astounding' Wildfires as Natural Disaster Upends Los Angeles Visit," *CNN*, January 8, 2025, https://edition.cnn.com/2025/01/08/politics/joe-biden-wildfires-southern-california/index.html; David Wallace-Wells, "Which City Burns Next?," *New York Times*, January 5, 2026, https://www.nytimes.com/2026/01/05/opinion/los-angeles-fires-lessons.html; Christopher Flavelle, "L.A. Fires Show Limits of America's Efforts to Cope with Climate Change," *New York Times*, January 10, 2025, https://www.nytimes.com/2025/01/10/climate/california-fires



9780316598484_PromiseMeAmerica_int_1P.indd 445 7/17/26 1:51 PM

-climate-change.html; Shawn Hubler, "'It Was Biblical': Ash and Flame Upend Life in Southern California," *New York Times*, January 8, 2025, https://www.nytimes.com/2025/01/08/us/los-angeles-wildfires.html.

39. "President Biden Awards Presidential Medal of Freedom with Distinction to His Holiness Pope Francis," *Biden White House*, January 11, 2025, https://bidenwhitehouse.archives.gov/briefing-room/statements-releases/2025/01/11/president-biden-awards-presidential-medal-of-freedom-with-distinction-to-his-holiness-pope-francis/; Eli Stokols, "Biden Nixes Trip to Meet the Pope Because of LA Fires," *Politico*, January 8, 2025, https://www.politico.com/news/2025/01/08/biden-cancel-rome-pope-00197255.
40. Scott Detrow, "Jimmy Carter Had an Early Ally in the Senate: A Young Democrat Named Joe Biden," NPR, December 30, 2024, https://www.npr.org/2024/12/30/1161050106/jimmy-carter-biden-relationship.
41. Alana Wise, "Biden Travels to Georgia on His 100th Day to Meet with Former President Carter," NPR, April 29, 2021, https://www.npr.org/2021/04/29/992053212/biden-travels-to-georgia-on-his-100th-day-to-meet-with-former-president-carter.
42. Mike Isaac and Theodore Schleifer, "Meta to End Fact-Checking Program in Shift Ahead of Trump Term," *New York Times*, January 7, 2025, https://www.nytimes.com/2025/01/07/technology/meta-fact-checking-facebook.html.
43. Damien Crave, "'Here We Go Again': Trump's Territorial Ambitions Rattle a Weary World," *New York Times*, January 8, 2025, https://www.nytimes.com/2025/01/08/world/asia/trump-greenland-panama.html.
44. Ben Protess, Jonah E. Bromwich, and Kate Christobek, "The President-Elect Is a Felon, but His Sentence Carries No Penalty," *New York Times*, January 10, 2025, https://www.nytimes.com/2025/01/10/nyregion/trump-hush-money-sentencing-convicted-felon.html.
45. Jack Smith, *Final Report of the Special Counsel Under 28 C.F.R. § 600.8* (U.S. Department of Justice, January 7, 2025), https://www.justice.gov/storage/Report-of-Special-Counsel-Smith-Volume-1-January-2025.pdf.
46. "Remarks by President Biden and Secretary of State Antony Blinken on the Administration's Work to Strengthen America and Lead the World," *Biden White House*, January 15, 2025, https://bidenwhitehouse.archives.gov/briefing-room/speeches-remarks/2025/01/15/remarks-by-president-biden-and-secretary-of-state-antony-blinken-on-the-administrations-work-to-strengthen-america-and-lead-the-world/.
47. Jessica T. Mathews, "What Was the Biden Doctrine?," *Foreign Affairs*, August 14, 2024, https://www.foreignaffairs.com/united-states/what-was-joe-biden-doctrine-leadership-hegemony-jessica-mathews.
48. Jimmy Carter, "Farewell Address to the Nation," *American Presidency Project*, January 14, 1981, https://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/documents/farewell-address-the-nation-0.
49. "President Dwight D. Eisenhower's Farewell Address (1961)," *National Archives*, 2024, https://www.archives.gov/milestone-documents/president-dwight-d-eisenhowers-farewell-address.
50. Adam Rasgon et al., "Israel and Hamas Are 'on the Brink' of Cease-Fire Agreement, Blinken Says," *New York Times*, January 14, 2025, https://www.nytimes.com/2025/01/14/world/middleeast/israel-hamas-cease-fire-deal-talks.html; Patrick Kingsley et al., "Negotiators Agree to Long-Awaited Cease-Fire and Hostage Deal for Gaza," *New York Times*, January 15,2025, https://www.nytimes.com/2025/01/15/world/middleeast/gaza-cease-fire.html.
51. "Full Transcript of President Biden's Farewell Address," *New York Times*, January 15, 2025, https://www.nytimes.com/2025/01/15/us/politics/full-transcript-of-president-bidens-farewell-address.html.



9780316598484_PromiseMeAmerica_int_1P.indd 446 7/17/26 1:51 PM

52. Erica L. Green, "In Farewell Address, Biden Warns of an 'Oligarchy' Taking Shape in America," *New York Times*, January 15, 2025, https://www.nytimes.com/2025/01/15/us/politics/biden-farewell-address.html. "Full Transcript of President Biden's Farewell Address."
53. "Remarks by President Biden at Department of Defense Commander in Chief Farewell Ceremony | Fort Myer, VA," *Biden White House*, January 16, 2025, https://bidenwhitehouse.archives.gov/briefing-room/speeches-remarks/2025/01/16/remarks-by-president-biden-at-department-of-defense-commander-in-chief-farewell-ceremony-fort-myer-va/.
54. Michael D. Shear and Zolan Kanno-Youngs, "Biden Issues a 'Full and Unconditional Pardon' of His Son Hunter Biden," *New York Times*, December 1, 2024, https://www.nytimes.com/2024/12/01/us/politics/biden-pardon-son-hunter.html; Peter Baker and Michael D. Shear, "Biden in Final Hours Pardons Relatives and Others to Thwart Trump Reprisals," *New York Times*, January 20, 2025, https://www.nytimes.com/2025/01/20/us/politics/biden-pardons-fauci-milley-cheney-jan-6.html; Michael D. Shear, "Biden Ends a Half-Century in Public Life on a Somber Note," *New York Times*, January 20, 2025, https://www.nytimes.com/2025/01/20/us/politics/biden-final-day.html.
55. Colleen Long, "Biden Issues Pardon to Late Black Nationalist Marcus Garvey, Who Influenced Civil Rights Movement," *PBS*, January 19, 2025, https://www.pbs.org/newshour/politics/biden-issues-pardon-to-late-black-nationalist-marcus-garvey-who-influenced-civil-rights-movement; Erica L. Green, "Biden Pardons Five More, Including the Civil Rights Leader Marcus Garvey," *New York Times*, January 19, 2025, https://www.nytimes.com/2025/01/19/us/politics/biden-pardons-marcus-garvey.html.
56. Erica L. Green and Zolan Kanno-Youngs, "Biden Commutes Sentences of Nearly 2,500 Drug Offenders," *New York Times*, January 17, 2025, https://www.nytimes.com/2025/01/17/us/politics/biden-commute-sentences-drug-offenders.html; Aishvarya Kavi, "Biden Commutes 37 Death Sentences Ahead of Trump's Plan to Resume Federal Executions," *New York Times*, December 23, 2024, https://www.nytimes.com/2024/12/23/us/politics/biden-commutes-37-death-sentences.html; Zolan Kanno-Youngs, "Biden Commutes the Sentences of 1,500 Americans, a Record for One Day," *New York Times*, December 12, 2024, https://www.nytimes.com/2024/12/12/us/politics/biden-pardons-commutes-1500.html; John Gramlich, "Biden Granted More Acts of Clemency Than Any Prior President," Pew Research Center, February 7, 2025, https://www.pewresearch.org/short-reads/2025/02/07/biden-granted-more-acts-of-clemency-than-any-prior-president/.
57. David E. Sanger and Michael D. Shear, "How the Cease-Fire Push Brought Together Biden and Trump's Teams," *New York Times*, January 15, 2025, https://www.nytimes.com/2025/01/15/us/politics/gaza-ceasefire-trump-biden.html; Kingsley et al., "Negotiators Agree to Long-Awaited Cease-Fire and Hostage Deal for Gaza"; Peter Baker, "Biden and Trump Defy Their History of Animosity to Seal Gaza Cease-Fire," *New York Times*, January 15, 2025, https://www.nytimes.com/2025/01/15/us/politics/trump-biden-gaza-ceasefire.html.
58. Deirdre Reynolds, "Mitchell Recalls Triumph After '700 Days of Failure,'" *Irish Independent*, April 11, 2016, https://www.independent.ie/irish-news/mitchell-recalls-triumph-after-700-days-of-failure/34615846.html.
59. "Remarks by President Biden on Reaching a Ceasefire and Hostage Deal," *Biden White House*, January 19, 2025, https://bidenwhitehouse.archives.gov/briefing-room/speeches-remarks/2025/01/19/remarks-by-president-biden-on-reaching-a-ceasefire-and-hostage-deal/; Aaron Boxerman et al., "Gazans and Israelis Dare to Hope as Cease-Fire Takes Hold," *New York Times*, January 19, 2025, https://www.nytimes.com/2025/01/19



9780316598484_PromiseMeAmerica_int_1P.indd 447 7/17/26 1:51 PM

9780316598484_PromiseMeAmerica_int_1P.indd 447 7/17/26 1:51 PM

## NOTES

/world/middleeast/gazans-and-israelis-dare-to-hope-as-cease-fire-takes-hold.html; Jacob J. Lew and David Satterfield, "How to Stop a Humanitarian Catastrophe in Gaza," *Foreign Affairs*, August 14, 2025, https://www.foreignaffairs.com/middle-east/how-stop-humanitarian-catastrophe-gaza; Patrick Kingsley, "As Truce Takes Hold, Gazans and Israelis Express Elation Tinged With Doubt," *New York Times*, January 19, 2025, https://www.nytimes.com/2025/01/19/world/middleeast/gaza-israel-mood.html.

60. Shaun Chornobroff, "Biden Ends His Term by Again Thanking SC for Putting Him in the White House," *South Carolina Daily Gazette*, January 19, 2025, https://scdailygazette.com/2025/01/19/biden-ends-his-term-by-again-thanking-sc-for-putting-him-in-the-white-house/.
61. Michael Rainey, "Biden Goes Out with a Bang in the Jobs Market," *Yahoo! Finance*, January 10, 2025, https://finance.yahoo.com/news/biden-goes-bang-jobs-market-000546537.html.
62. Clyde McGrady and Rick Rojas, "The Search for Lessons in Trump's Return on Martin Luther King Day," *New York Times*, January 20, 2025, https://www.nytimes.com/2025/01/20/us/politics/trump-martin-luther-king.html.
63. "Read the Letter Biden Left Behind for Trump in Oval Office," *NBC Philadelphia*, January 22, 2025, https://www.nbcphiladelphia.com/news/national-international/read-the-letter-biden-left-behind-for-trump-in-oval-office/4085860/.
64. Abraham Lincoln, "First Inaugural Address of Abraham Lincoln" (March 4, 1861), *Avalon Project*, Yale Law School, 2008, https://avalon.law.yale.edu/19th_century/lincoln1.asp.
65. Martin Luther King Jr., "I've Been to the Mountaintop" (April 3, 1968), *American Rhetoric*, January 18, 2025, https://www.americanrhetoric.com/speeches/mlkivebeentothemountaintop.htm.
66. Darlene Superville, "Biden Leaves Office and Washington After 50 Years but Says, 'We're Not Leaving the Fight,'" *KSAT.com*, January 20, 2025, https://www.ksat.com/news/politics/2025/01/20/biden-leaves-office-and-washington-after-50-years-but-says-were-not-leaving-the-fight/; Aishvarya Kavi, "President Biden Becomes a Great-Grandfather," *New York Times*, January 8, 2025, https://www.nytimes.com/2025/01/08/us/president-biden-becomes-a-great-grandfather.html; Lance Orozco, "Former President Joe Biden, Jill Biden Arrive in Santa Barbara County for Post White House Vacation," *KCLU*, January 20, 2025, https://www.kclu.org/2025-01-20/former-president-joe-biden-jill-biden-arrive-in-santa-barbara-county-for-post-white-house-vacation; Adam Cancryn, "Joe Biden Departs Washington as Ex-President," *Politico*, January 20, 2025, https://www.politico.com/live-updates/2025/01/20/donald-trump-inauguration-day-news-updates-analysis/joe-biden-leaves-washington-00199324.

## EPILOGUE : THE POWER OF OUR EXAMPLE

1. Richard B. Morris, "'Rendezvous with Destiny'—F.D.R. in His Own Words," *New York Times*, April 10, 1960, https://www.nytimes.com/1960/04/10/archives/-rendezvous-with-destiny-f-d-r-in-his-own-words-fdr-in-his-own.html.
2. Joe Biden (@JoeBiden), "Cancer touches us all. Like so many of you, Jill and I have learned that we are strongest in the broken places. Thank you for lifting us up with love and support," X, May 19, 2025, https://x.com/JoeBiden/status/1924427587582828753?lang=en.
3. "Fact Sheet: The Biden-Harris Administration Record," *Biden White House*, January 6, 2025, https://bidenwhitehouse.archives.gov/wp-content/uploads/2025/01/The-Biden-Harris-Administration-Record.pdf.
4. "Fact Sheet: The Biden-Harris Administration Record," *Biden White House*.

4. "Fact Sheet: The Biden-Harris Administration Record," *Biden White House*.



9780316598484_PromiseMeAmerica_int_1P.indd 448 7/17/26 1:51 PM

## NOTES

5. Richard Wike et al., "Trump Gets Negative Reviews Internationally as Fewer Say U.S. Is a Reliable Partner," Pew Research Center, June 23, 2026, https://www.pewresearch.org/global/2026/06/23/trump-gets-negative-reviews-internationally-as-fewer-say-u-s-is-a-reliable-partner/.
6. "The United States Exits Paris Agreement," Council on Foreign Relations, January 27, 2026, https://www.cfr.org/articles/united-states-exits-paris-agreement.
7. Lisa Friedman et al., "Trump Signs Orders to Promote Fossil Fuels and End Climate Policies," *New York Times*, January 20, 2025, https://www.nytimes.com/2025/01/20/climate/trump-emergency-oil-gas.html.
8. Ashleigh Fields, "Jan. 6 Plaque Installed at US Capitol After 3-Year Delay," *The Hill*, March 8, 2026, https://thehill.com/homenews/house/5773634-law-enforcement-capitol-jan-6-plaque-installed/.
9. Diana Stancy, "Trump Tears Down East Wing for $300M Ballroom Ahead of High-Stakes China Meeting," *Fox News*, October 25, 2025, https://www.foxnews.com/politics/trump-tears-down-east-wing-300m-ballroom-ahead-high-stakes-china-meeting; Tamara Keith and Saige Miller, "Trump Plows Ahead with East Wing Demolition Despite Calls for Caution," NPR, October 23, 2025, https://www.npr.org/2025/10/23/nx-s1-5583959/white-house-east-wing-demolition-ballroom-trump.
10. Eric Westervelt, Anusha Mathur, and Brent Jones, "Mapping ICE's Expanding Footprint, and the Communities Fighting Back," NPR, March 23, 2025, https://www.npr.org/2026/03/23/g-s1-114107/ices-growing-detention-footprint-and-the-communities-fighting-back.
11. "Withdrawing the United States from the World Health Organization," *Trump White House*, January 20, 2025, https://www.whitehouse.gov/presidential-actions/2025/01/withdrawing-the-united-states-from-the-worldhealth-organization/.
12. Drew Pittock, "Global Confidence in Trump Stands at 23%, Pew Survey Finds," *USA Today*, June 23, 2026, https://www.usatoday.com/story/news/world/2026/06/23/pew-survey-global-sentiment-trump-united-states/90664231007/.
13. *The Great Experiment: George Washington and the American Republic*, the Morgan Library and Museum, September 16, 1999–January 9, 2000, https://www.themorgan.org/exhibitions/the-great-experiment.
14. Molly Murray, "Caesar Rodney's Vote on Declaration of Independence Broke Deadlock: Archives," *Delaware Online*, June 30, 2018, https://www.delawareonline.com/story/news/local/2018/06/30/declaration-independence-july-4th-caesar-rodney/748147002/.

# ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Joe Biden served as the forty-sixth president of the United States. When he took office, he inherited a country reeling from the worst pandemic in a century, the worst economic crisis since the Great Depression, and the worst assault on our democracy since the Civil War.

By the time he left office, he had overseen the largest vaccination program in the history of America, built the U.S. economy to become the strongest in the world, and preserved the nation's democracy. During his presidency, Biden passed historic legislation, including the biggest investment in America's infrastructure since Eisenhower, the biggest investment in American manufacturing in a generation, and the biggest investment in the climate in the history of the world.

Under Biden's leadership, child poverty was cut in half, the cost of seniors' prescription drugs decreased, more people had health insurance than ever before, and a record sixteen million jobs were created.

Before his presidency, Biden served as a U.S. senator for Delaware from 1973 to 2009, when he was sworn in as vice president of the United States. He served as vice president to President Barack Obama from 2009 to 2017.

Biden was born in Scranton, Pennsylvania, and grew up in Claymont, Delaware. He is the author of two previous books, *Promises to Keep: On Life and Politics* and *Promise Me, Dad: A Year of Hope, Hardship, and Purpose*. He resides in Wilmington, Delaware, with his wife, Jill.

9780316508484_PromiseMeAmerica_int_1P.indd 453 7/17/26 1:51 PM