

■ Juneteenth National Independence Day Act—Remarks by President Joe Biden

Date: June 17, 2021

Author: President Joe Biden

Genre: speech; commemoration

Summary Overview

Recognizing Juneteenth as a federal holiday is generally supported by liberal and progressive Democrats and even some Republican conservatives, as it commemorates the emancipation of enslaved African Americans in the United States. On June 17, 2021, President Joe Biden signed the Juneteenth National Independence Day Act into law, establishing Juneteenth—that is, June 19—as an official national holiday. In his remarks, Biden noted that the first Juneteenth had occurred one hundred and fifty-six years earlier (1865) when Union Army Major General Gordon Granger traveled to Galveston, Texas, to enforce the Emancipation Proclamation of 1863 and free any remaining slaves. Biden noted the acknowledgment of Juneteenth was a long time coming, specifically crediting the decades-long advocacy of Opal Lee, a ninety-four-year-old Black woman from Texas whose home was burned down on Juneteenth when she was twelve years old. Lee’s experience demonstrated that African Americans experienced racially motivated violence long after slavery ended.

Biden argued that the acknowledgment of this painful history would help the nation grow stronger. However, more needed to be done, he noted, than to establish a commemoration of Juneteenth. Biden committed his administration to combat racial discrimination in housing, schooling, and the justice system. He also vowed to protect Black voting rights against restrictive voting laws which he called an attack on democracy itself.

Defining Moment

On January 1, 1863, in the midst of the Civil War, President Abraham Lincoln issued an executive order known as the Emancipation Proclamation. The order freed the 3.5 million African American slaves living in the ten Southern states rebelling against the Union. The Proclamation also promised that those fleeing slavery would be welcomed by Union armies. Lincoln’s order was largely unenforceable, however, as it only applied to territories that Union forces did not control. Yet it encouraged African Americans to flee to these Northern armies to gain freedom. Tens of thousands of those who fled would end up serving in the Union military.

The Proclamation also confirmed that a Union victory would lead to the abolition of slavery. Even after the Union victory and the surrender of the Confederacy in May 1865, however, some slave owners refused to free their slaves. African Americans in the states of

the Confederacy were aware of the Emancipation Proclamation, but until the Union Army occupied these states there was no enforcement.

On June 19, Major General Gordon Granger, who had only recently been given command of Texas, issued General Order No. 3 in Galveston. The order stated that in accordance with the Emancipation Proclamation all slaves in Galveston were free. Not surprisingly, the Black community welcomed the order, and celebrations erupted throughout the city. The following year, the first Juneteenth celebrations commemorating Granger’s order took place in both Galveston and Houston, Texas. Over time, Juneteenth celebrations spread throughout the United States, often in the face of resistance and even violence from racist white antagonists. On January 1, 1980, Texas became the first state to recognize Juneteenth as a state holiday. The Juneteenth National Independence Day Act was passed by the U.S.



President Biden signed the Juneteenth National Independence Day Act into law, June 17, 2021. Opal Lee is third from left. Photo via Wikimedia Commons. [Public domain.]

Senate on June 15, 2021, and the U.S. House of Representatives on June 16, 2021. When Joe Biden signed the act into law on June 17 every state except South Dakota had officially recognized Juneteenth as a state holiday.

Author Biography

Joseph R. Biden was born on November 20, 1942, in Scranton, Pennsylvania, before moving to Delaware with his family in 1953. He graduated from the University of Delaware in 1965 and received his law degree from Syracuse University in 1968. In 1972, in a campaign staffed primarily by his family members, he defeated the Republican incumbent

and was elected to the U.S. Senate. The month after the election and before he had taken office, Biden's wife Neilia and daughter Naomi were killed in a traffic accident. A member of the Senate from 1973 to 2009, Biden held numerous powerful and influential positions including chair of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee and the Senate Judiciary Committee. Biden was chosen as Senator Barack Obama's vice presidential candidate in 2008 and served as vice president from 2009 to 2017. In 2020, Biden was elected president of the United States. He ran again in 2024 but withdrew under pressure following a poor debate performance which highlighted his age.



Historical Document

THE PRESIDENT: Thank you, thank you, thank you.

Well, thank you, Madam Vice President.

One hundred and fifty-six years ago—one hundred and fifty-six years—June 19th, 1865—John, thanks for being here—a major general of the Union Army arrived in Galveston, Texas, to enforce the Emancipation Proclamation and free the last enslaved Americans in Texas from bondage. A day, as you all know—I’m going to repeat some of what was said—that became known as Juneteenth. You all know that. A day that reflects what the Psalm tell us: “Weeping may endure for a night, but joy cometh in the morning.”

Juneteenth marks both the long, hard night of slavery and subjugation, and a promise of a brighter morning to come. This is a day of profound—in my view—profound weight and profound power.

A day in which we remember the moral stain, the terrible toll that slavery took on the country and continues to take—what I’ve long called “America’s original sin.”

At the same time, I also remember the extraordinary capacity to heal, and to hope, and to emerge from the most painful moments and a bitter, bitter version of ourselves, but to make a better version of ourselves.

You know, today, we consecrate Juneteenth for what it ought to be, what it must be: a national holiday. As the Vice President noted, a holiday that will join the others of our national celebrations: our independence, our laborers who built this nation, our servicemen and women who served and died in its defense. And the first new national holiday since the creation of Martin Luther King Holiday nearly four decades ago.

I am grateful to the members of Congress here today—in particular, the Congressional Black Caucus, who did so much to make this day possible.

I’m especially pleased that we showed the nation that we can come together as Democrats and Republicans to commemorate this day with the overwhelming bipartisan support of the Congress. I hope this is the beginning of a change in the way we deal with one another.

And we’re blessed—we’re blessed to mark the day in the presence of Ms. Opal Lee. As my mother would say, “God love her.” (Applause.)

I had the honor of meeting her in Nevada more than a year ago. She told me she loved me, and I believed it. (Laughter.) I wanted to believe it. (Laughs.) Ms. Opal, you're incredible. A daughter of Texas. Grandmother of the movement to make Juneteenth a federal holiday.

And Ms. Opal is—you won't believe it—she's 49 years old. (Laughter.) Or 94 years old, but I—(laughter). You are an incredible woman, Ms. Opal. You really are.

As a child growing up in Texas, she and her family would celebrate Juneteenth. On Juneteenth, 1939, when she was 12 years old, the white—a white mob torched her family home. But such hate never stopped her any more than it stopped the vast majority of you I'm looking at from this podium.

Over the course of decades, she's made it her mission to see that this day came. It was almost a singular mission. She's walked for miles and miles, literally and figuratively, to bring attention to Juneteenth, to make this day possible.

I ask, once again, we all stand and give her a warm welcome to the White House. (Applause.)

As they still say in the Senate and I said for 36 years, "if you excuse me there for a point of personal privilege," as I was walking down, I regret that my grandchildren aren't here because this is a really, really, really important moment in our history.

By making Juneteenth a federal holiday, all Americans can feel the power of this day, and learn from our history, and celebrate progress, and grapple with the distance we've come but the distance we have to travel, Jim.

You know, I said a few weeks ago, marking the 100th anniversary of the Tulsa Race Massacre, great nations don't ignore their most painful moments. Great nations don't ignore their most painful moments. They don't ignore those moments of the past. They embrace them. Great nations don't walk away. We come to terms with the mistakes we made. And in remembering those moments, we begin to heal and grow stronger.

The truth is, it's not—simply not enough just to commemorate Juneteenth. After all, the emancipation of enslaved Black Americans didn't mark the end of America's work to deliver on the promise of equality; it only marked the beginning.

To honor the true meaning of Juneteenth, we have to continue toward that promise because we've not gotten there yet. The Vice President and I and our

entire administration and all of you in this room are committed to doing just that.

That's why we've launched an aggressive effort to combat racial discrimination in housing—finally address the cruel fact that a home owned, to this day, by a Black American family is usually appraised at a lower rate for a similar home owned by a white family in a similar area.

That's why we committed to increasing Black homeownership, one of the biggest drivers of generational wealth.

That's why we're making it possible for more Black entrepreneurs to access—to access capital, because their ideas are as good; they lack the capital to get their fair—and get their fair share of federal contracts so they can begin to build wealth.

That's why we're working to give each and every child, three and four years of age, not daycare, but school—in a school. (Applause.)

That's why—that's why we're unlocking the incredibly creative and innovation—innovation of the history—of our Historical Black Colleges and Universities, providing them with the resources to invest in research centers and laboratories to help HBCU graduates prepare and compete for good-paying jobs in the industries of the future.

Folks, the promise of equality is not going to be fulfilled until we become real—it becomes real in our schools and on our Main Streets and in our neighborhoods—our healthcare system and ensuring that equity is at the heart of our fight against the pandemic; in the water that comes out of our faucets and the air that we breathe in our communities; in our justice system—so that we can fulfill the promise of America for all people. All of our people.

And it's not going to be fulfilled so long as the sacred right to vote remains under attack. (Applause.)

We see this assault from restrictive laws, threats of intimidation, voter purges, and more—an assault that offends the very democracy—our very democracy.

We can't rest until the promise of equality is fulfilled for every one of us in every corner of this nation. That, to me, is the meaning of Juneteenth. That's what it's about.

So let's make this June—this very Juneteenth, tomorrow—the first that our nation will celebrate all together, as one nation—a Juneteenth of action on many fronts.

One of those is vaccinations. Tomorrow, the Vice President will be in Atlanta on a bus tour, helping to spread the word, like all of you have been doing, on lifesaving vaccines.

And across the country this weekend, including here in Washington, people will be canvassing and hosting events in their communities, going door-to-door, encouraging vaccinations.

We've built equity into the heart of the vaccination program from day one, but we still have more work to do to close the racial gap in vaccination rates. The more we can do that, the more we can save lives.

Today also marks the sixth anniversary of the tragic deaths of—at Mother Emanuel Church in Charleston, South Carolina. A killer motivated by hate, intending to start a race war in South Carolina. He joined his victims in a Bible study class, then he took their lives in the house of worship.

It's a reminder that our work to root out hate never ends—because hate only hides, it never fully goes away. It hides. And when you breathe oxygen under that rock, it comes out.

And that's why we must understand that Juneteenth represents not only the commemoration of the end of slavery in America more than 150 years ago, but the ongoing work to have to bring true equity and racial justice into American society, which we can do.

In short, this day doesn't just celebrate the past; it calls for action today.

I wish all Americans a happy Juneteenth. I am shortly going to—in a moment, going to sign into law, making it a federal holiday.

And I have to say to you, I've only been President for several months, but I think this will go down, for me, as one of the greatest honors I will have had as President, not because I did it; you did it—Democrats and Republicans. But it's an enormous, enormous honor.

Thank you for what you've done. And, by the way, typical of most of us in Congress and the Senate, I went down to the other end of the hall first and thanked your staffs because I know who does the hard work. (Laughter and applause.) They're down there. They're at the other end, but I thanked them as well.

May God bless you all. And may God protect our troops. Thank you. (Applause.)

Now, I'd like to invite up, while I sign, Senator Tina Smith, Senator Ed Markey, Senator Raphael Warnock, Senator John Cornyn, Whip John [Jim] Clyburn, Representative Barbara Lee, Representative Danny Davis, Chair Joyce Beatty, and Sheila Jackson Lee, and Ms. Opal.

(The act is signed.) (Applause.)



Document Analysis

President Biden begins his remarks celebrating the establishment of Juneteenth as a federal holiday, by noting that the first Juneteenth took place one hundred and fifty-six years earlier when a “major general of the Union Army arrived in Galveston, Texas, to enforce the Emancipation Proclamation and free the last enslaved Americans in Texas from bondage.” Juneteenth is a reminder of “America’s original sin” of slavery, but also it reveals an “extraordinary capacity to heal, and to hope, and to emerge from the most painful moments and a bitter, bitter version of ourselves, but to make a better version of ourselves.” Such high-flying rhetoric from presidents and other top public officials is frequently heard at commemorative events, but in many cases, as here, it is not out of place and serves to mark the significance of the occasion.

Biden highlights the important role played by Opal Lee, a ninety-four-year-old Black woman from Texas, in making Juneteenth a federal holiday. In 1939, when Lee was twelve years old, a white mob torched her family home on Juneteenth. Lee remained unrelenting and “over the course of decades, she’s made it her mission to see that this day came. She’s walked for miles and miles, literally and figuratively, to bring attention to Juneteenth, to make this day possible.”

Biden notes the unfortunate reality that Lee’s experiences with racial violence were neither an aberration nor a rarity. The 100th anniversary of the Tulsa Race massacre (1921) was memorialized only a few weeks earlier by Biden. As these events make clear, emancipation did not lead to immediate equality or justice for African Americans. The painful history of slavery and racial violence in our country must be acknowledged, as this is only way “we begin to heal and grow stronger.”

Commemorating Juneteenth is not enough. Biden promises “an aggressive effort to combat racial discrimination in housing,” greater access to capital for Black entrepreneurs, universal preschool, and greater investment in historical Black colleges and universities. True equality can be achieved only if it exists in our schools, hospitals, and justice system, he

suggests. Biden warns that not everyone believes in equality. Black voting rights are under attack in the form of “restrictive laws, threats of intimidation, voter purges.” If we truly want to honor the meaning of Juneteenth, he notes, it is paramount that Americans repeal this assault on our democracy. African Americans still face violent attacks like that committed at Mother Emanuel Church in Charleston, South Carolina, in 2015.

In recognizing Juneteenth, Americans, Biden says, must also pledge to continue to work towards “true equity and racial justice.” The holiday is not simply a recognition of the abolition of slavery, it is also a call for action in the present and future. President Biden concludes that while he has only been president for several months, “I think this will go down, for me, as one of the greatest honors I will have had as President.”

Thus, on June 17, 2021, Juneteenth became the eleventh national holiday recognized by the federal government. As President Biden noted, Juneteenth was the first federally recognized holiday since Martin Luther King Jr. Day (January 15), proclaimed in 1983. In many respects, Juneteenth’s journey was remarkable and a reflection of the nation’s recognition of a not always admirable past.

What began as a celebration among newly freed people in an obscure little town in Texas proved to have considerable resonance over the years for African Americans. As Opal Lee’s experience make clear, African Americans often celebrated Juneteenth in the face of considerable resistance and even violence. In the 1960s and 1970s, largely through the efforts of Black activists like Lee, these celebrations gained greater mainstream attention and support which would eventually lead to the adoption of Juneteenth as a national holiday.

It is worth noting that President Donald Trump has also made several remarks about Juneteenth. In 2020, Trump originally planned to hold a campaign rally in Tulsa, Oklahoma, on June 19th, which sparked controversy due to the date’s significance and the location (Tulsa was the site of a massacre of Black townsfolk in 1921). After widespread criticism, Trump rescheduled the rally to the following day. In an interview with

the *Wall Street Journal*, Trump explained that he only learned about Juneteenth through the reactions to the rally date and then claimed credit for increasing the holiday's recognition, saying someone had told him, "you made it famous."

—Gerald F. Goodwin, PhD

Bibliography and Additional Reading

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