News



Democratic presidential candidate former Vice President Joe Biden listens as he meets with members of the community at Grace Lutheran Church in Kenosha, Wis., Thursday, Sept. 3, 2020. (AP/Carolyn Kaster)

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Kenosha, Wis. — September 4, 2020
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Joe Biden told residents of Kenosha, Wisconsin, that recent turmoil following the police shooting of Jacob Blake, a Black man, could help Americans confront centuries of systemic racism, drawing a sharp contrast with President Donald Trump amid a reckoning that has galvanized the nation.

"We're finally now getting to the point where we're going to be addressing the original sin of this country, 400 years old … slavery and all the vestiges of it," Biden said at Grace Lutheran Church, where he met with community leaders after a private session with Blake and his family.

The visit marked the former vice president's first trip to the battleground state of Wisconsin as the Democratic presidential nominee and was a vivid illustration of the contrast he offers to Trump.

While Biden spent more than an hour with the Blake family, Trump didn't mention Blake during his own trip to Kenosha on Tuesday. Where Biden traced problems in the criminal justice system back to slavery, Trump refused to acknowledge systemic racism and offered his unvarnished support to law enforcement, blaming the recent violence on "domestic terror."

"I can't say if tomorrow God made me president, I can't guarantee you everything gets solved in four years," Biden said. But "it would be a whole lot better; we'd get a whole lot further down the road" if Trump isn't re-elected.

"There's certain things worth losing over," he concluded, "and this is something worth losing over if you have to — but we're not going to lose."

Blake remains hospitalized after being shot in the back seven times by a white Kenosha police officer while authorities were trying to arrest him on Aug. 23. The shooting is the latest police confrontation with a Black man to spark protests. It follows demonstrations that swelled nationwide after George Floyd was killed by a white Minneapolis officer in May.

Outside Grace Lutheran, Blake's uncle, Justin Blake, compared Trump's and Biden's respective visits as he marched and chanted with a crowd. "Trump didn't ask about my nephew. Trump didn't mention my nephew's name while he was here," Justin Blake said.

Justin Blake called Biden "more of a unifier" and credited the Democrat for bringing up criminal justice changes before being asked. But Justin Blake said "we're holding everybody's feet to the fire. Nobody gets a free pass."

Biden heard similar sentiments inside the church, where residents offered searing accounts of their struggles.

Porsche Bennett, an organizer for Black Lives Activists Kenosha, told Biden she's "tired" at just 31 years old and worried for her three young, Black children. "For so many decades we've been shown we don't matter," she said, adding that she's heard promises from plenty of politicians, but not "action."

Biden answered that, because he's white, "I can't understand what it's like to walk out the door or send my son out the door or my daughter and worry about, just because they're Black, they might not come back."



Justin Blake, uncle of Jacob Blake, protests outside the Grace Lutheran Church where Democratic presidential candidate former Vice President Joe Biden is scheduled to hold an event Thursday, Sept. 3, 2020, in Kenosha, Wis. (AP/Morry Gash)

But he compared the current era of cell phone videos of violent police actions to television footage showing civil rights protesters being beaten more than a half-century ago. He called both circumstances a politically crucial awakening for white Americans. Biden also stressed the disproportionate effects of the coronavirus pandemic and its economic fallout on non-whites.

"I think the country is much more primed to take responsibility, because they now have seen what you see," Biden told Bennett, the community organizer.

Barb DeBerge, owner of DeBerge Framing & Gallery, told Biden of the deep pain exposed by the protests and how it has reached many business owners whose establishments have been burned. DeBerge noted her shop still stands, but said, "I just I don't think I really grieved as much as I should because being a business owner, I have to keep going, I have to keep working."

Wisconsin Gov. Tony Evers, a Democrat, said that he'd asked both Biden and Trump not to come. "I would prefer that no one be here, be it candidate Trump or candidate Biden," Evers said in a news conference.

Yet Kenosha was mostly calm for Biden's visit, other than some verbal jousting outside the church between activists, including Bennett, and at least one Trump supporter.

Michelle Stauder, a 60-year-old retired Kenosha school teacher said Biden is "here spreading the word of peace and rebuilding."

Kenneth Turner stood nearby with a Trump-Pence yard sign. "Everyone is blaming Trump for everything," the 50-year-old Kenosha man said. "But problems here have been around a long time before Trump."

Biden criticized Trump for his sweeping condemnations of protesters, his absolute defense of law enforcement and denials that Americans with black and brown skin face barriers that whites do not — statements aimed by the president at his overwhelmingly white political base.

During his Kenosha trip Tuesday, Trump toured damaged buildings and discussed ways to quell unrest with law enforcement officials. Trump was greeted by supporters who occasionally mixed with and yelled at Black Lives Matter organizers.

The president amplified his approach Thursday evening in Pennsylvania, another state that could decide the election. "Biden went [to Kenosha] today. There was nobody there. There was nobody there," Trump said. At about the same time, Biden was greeted after an evening event by hundreds of supporters who chanted, "Let's go Joe!"

Trump also repeated his baseless assertion that Biden supports riots. Biden, in fact, has repeatedly condemned violence, most recently on Thursday, and he has criticized Trump for not denouncing a 17-year-old Illinois teen now charged with killing two protesters after he traveled to Kenosha armed and intent, he said, on protecting local businesses.

Biden, who enjoyed police union backing for much of his political career, has defended police officers for bravery and public service. But he said again Thursday that policing must be overhauled. He repeated his promise of a national commission

on policing if he's elected.

Biden does not want to "defund the police," contrary to Trump's claims. But he proposes that local forces agree to certain best practices as a condition of federal grants. He also wants to spend more on other public agencies, such as mental health services, to ease social problems police must handle by default.

Most police officers are "decent people," Biden said in Kenosha, but he added that "every organization" has "bad people." That, he said, gives the country "a chance to change things, and we can."

As he boarded his plane for a return trip to his Delaware home, Biden said he didn't know if his trip to Kenosha was more successful than Trump's.

"But I felt good about it," he said. "I think we brought people together and I felt good about it."

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Barrow reported from Atlanta. Associated Press writer Zeke Miller in Washington, and Michael Tarm and Noreen Nasir in Kenosha, Wisconsin, contributed.

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