

*CNN Newsroom with Alisyn Camerota and Victor Blackwell*

07/13/21

3:11:32 p.m.

17 minutes and 13 seconds

ALISYN CAMEROTA: Listening there to President Biden give a very passionate speech about what he calls “the most serious test to our democracy since the Civil War.” He's taking about voting rights and the restrictive voting laws that are happening in 17 states across the country. It's obviously something he feels very strongly about. I mean, he basically was saying it's the most fundamental right and that liberty is being threatened. We have an incredible panel to help us unpack everything he talked about. [INTRODUCES PANEL] Dana, I want to start with you. I know your time with us is limited. It was very interesting to hear President Biden. I would say that's his most — correct me if I'm wrong — fulsome defense of voting rights thus far. Civil rights leaders have been calling for this and saying you have been in office for six months. I mean, infrastructure is important but this is the most important and that seems like what he was saying today.

DANA BASH: No question about it. You're exactly right that there has been an outcry from not just civil rights leaders, just, I mean, run of the mill Democrats in states across the country who feel completely under siege by their local leaders, by their legislatures and they don't feel that from the White House there has been enough effort made rhetorically to try to push back. And that was definitely answered today with that speech. You can't imagine a stronger, more robust speech. The question is, how do you turn the speech, trying to galvanize people using the bully pulpit, traditional means into a real battle with people who he said, have you no shame. The answer is, no. They don't have shame, a lot of these — these people. These, you know, Republicans, conservatives. People who are believing and peddling in the Big Lie in order to change and roll back these laws. So, in some ways, this was important. It was a first step for people who have been calling for this. But, in some ways, unless the President is going to go another step and going to say we need to actually change rules in the United States Senate to get this done so the federal government can have more of an impact, what he basically was doing was taking kind of a butter knife to a fight against a nuclear bomb and that is what the pressure is going to continue to be on the President to convince some of those moderate Democrats in the place he used to work for 36 years, the United States Senate that this is the one issue that is important to work around the filibuster on.

VICTOR BLACKWELL: Yeah, John King, out to you. One of the civil rights groups that spoke with the President a couple days ago, a little more than a week ago, actually, said it would have been an epic fail for the President to not mention the filibuster or say it's time to create a carve out if he didn't do that during the speech. He didn't do it. Didn't mention those — those conservative Democrats.

JOHN KING: Yeah, Victor, I think that's the call to paradox, call it inconsistent. There may be a better word for it, but the President made a very passionate case for the two pieces of Democratic legislation that would deal with voting rights and essentially wipe some of these — tested in courts if they passed it — but wipe these Republican laws off the books or at least try to. The

President mentioned it at the beginning, but then he sort of conceded the point that that wasn't going to pass and talking near the end of the speech about how important it is for Democrats and their friends in the civil rights community and the voting rights to educate people, to register people, to teach them about the new laws and turn them out in 2022. That was sort of an admission right there from the President implicitly that they will not get a new federal law. And you mentioned that it would be an epic fail, look, there's a lot of progressives, a lot of civil rights leader, who wanted the President to look the American people or the Senate in the eye and say, this is so important, I'm going to change my mind, meaning his love of filibuster, his love of Senate procedure and then try to work the Democrats to it. But he simply did not do that. And I think that will be — there will be great praise for the passion and the anger in the President's speech. Praise for the promise to continue this fight. But there will be disappointment among those who count votes in Washington knowing that, unless he's willing to change his own mind and change minds in the Senate, you will not get that vote in Washington.

CAMEROTA: Bakari, what did you hear?

BAKARI SELLERS: I actually agree with John King. I mean, I think that the question is going to be, how much does this mean? How much do you really want it? The oratory was brilliant. The emotion was palpable, but at the end of the day, he didn't mention filibuster. At the end of the day, he didn't mention Sinema and Manchin. I mean, I thought the speech was great. I thought the delivery was great. I thought the backdrop was great. But we've been here before. I mean, look, you had George Elmore in 1946 who was what they deemed to be a renaissance negro who filed a suit — *Elmore vs. Rice* in 1947 — just so black folk could vote in primaries in the South Carolina Democratic Party. You had the Freedom Summer in 1964 with the death of Goodman, Shirner, and Cheney. I mean, to quote John Lewis, John Lewis would do anything. He would actually get into good trouble because we know that the filibuster is rooted in injustice and oppression. And so, I think that while the speech and the oratory were good, the substance and question that many of us would have for the President of the United States who we love, support, and voted for is how much does it mean to you? Because without getting rid of the filibuster, without getting rid of the filibuster, you're going to have many people who came out and waited in line voting for you with absolutely no recourse and Republicans will continue to steamroll and rip apart what we fought for and many people died for which is now a Voting Rights Act which is nothing but a nub.

BLACKWELL: So, Kaitlan, place this speech into the context of the White House strategy. Was this a fulfillment of the promise to use the bully pulpit that the President made to those civil rights groups or is this a kick off of something more than what we heard, that there will be more muscle put behind those words?

KAITLAN COLLINS: Well, they haven't telegraphed any other speeches. They have said that he will continue to talk about this extensively, so we can imagine there may be more of these speeches to come. But I do think one part of the strategy here today was not just to talk about passing legislation in the future but also to talk about why we are seeing Republicans in states nationwide try to change their election laws. Like what you're seeing in Texas, basing all of it off of the lie that was pushed and perpetrated by former President Trump. And that is what President

Biden got out here today when he was ticking through all of the audits and the hand counts — recounts and the recounts that doubled and tripled themselves in some states to go after and make sure the vote count was entirely and completely accurate. And he walked through that step by step. And I think that was part of a tool to convince and to push back on some of these Republicans in these states to say what they are doing is not based on anything. It's not that there was fraud in one of these states and that's why you're seeing some lawmakers and state lawmakers talk about the need to overhaul it. There is none of that. And so, President Biden was going after to say it's baseless what they are basing all of this is on. You know, what they are pushing back on and what you're seeing Democrats and civil rights activists say is such a threat to democracy in trying to limit access to the ballot is based on nothing. All perpetrated by former President Trump. And he was saying the Big Lie is just that. It's a Big Lie. One other point that was interesting that the President made is he looked at lawsuits against some of these new voting laws that are happening in states, including one by the Department of Justice in Georgia. It's clear, of course, how that will end up, but we've heard from some civil rights leaders who say that you can't litigate their way out of this issue. They believe the solution is legislation. And so, yes, he did call it out, that was one of the biggest applause lines where he said he would sign those two voting rights bills, but, of course, they face, basically, insurmountable odds on Capitol Hill unless something does change to the filibuster, so those two points, I thought, were very notable of his strategy while he was here in Philadelphia.

CAMEROTA: Errol, here's the problem. The people who believe the Big Lie get their information from a network that still calls itself a news network though it doesn't take the President's speeches and today was no different. They noted that President Biden was speaking but they never took the sound up. They were too busy covering Bill Gates's divorce. And so, the people will not hear — I mean — a large chunk of the country — will not hear President Biden's message that — there — that democracy is basically, you know, in some states, being threatened or stolen before our very eyes.

ERROL LOUIS: Yeah, it was a remarkably important message. It could only have been, I think, more solemn if it had been delivered during primetime from the Oval Office. It's that important when he says that democracy is under attack in a way that hasn't been true in over 100 years. This is really important. If other networks choose not to deliver that incredibly important message, that's on them. But, you know, what I heard the President, Alisyn, saying is that this is not going to just be his problem. This is not just going to be his task, that he's trying to enlist the rest of the nation and, in particular, he's trying to enlist civil rights organizations. He's trying to enlist the courts. He's trying to let everybody know this is going to have to be a fight that everybody is involved in. And if it is successful, if he does manage to stir and arouse a significant percentage of the population, that will be the pressure on the Senate. And that will be the pressure on members of Congress. That will be the pressure indirectly on the courts to try to begin to turn the tide here. It's going to be a big, long, vicious fight. I think the stakes could not be higher. The President made that clear. And those who want to try and avoid this fight will find it will be right in their face. I mean, the Democratic base who he was speaking to today will be aroused, it's going to be in the streets, is going to be working for a lot of different changes and, you know, we saw this example in Texas. Extraordinary action by state legislatures. You know, not — not just a stunt but people really sort of being as creative as possible in trying to turn back

this threat to the country.

BLACKWELL: John, I jotted down that section that Errol referenced, this forming of a coalition. But I wrote next to it, “new?” Because they already have that. He had the meeting with the civil rights activists. The All-Star Game for the MLB was pulled out of Georgia because of their voting rights. They got all of these groups. I mean, you say that you heard an admission there will not be new legislation. I didn't hear anything new from — from the President as what this next step will be.

KING: I do think, you know, we should give the President he decided, under some pressure, but decided to give this speech. The question is, as Kaitlan notes, is: will there be follow up? Will there be additional speeches? Will he and the Vice President travel the country? So, I don't think we should set it all aside. But when the President says legislation is not the only tool and talks about lawsuits and talks about mobilizing voters, that to me, and does not mention the filibuster, does not promise to lobby senators to change their mind, that, to me, was the implicit admission that this is going to be settled at the ballot box next year more than settled by any big dramatic vote in the Congress. One other point, the President at one point, he was trying to shame Republicans. My god, you know, pay attention to the big lie, but we've seen this play out. And I think some times the President sometimes does have this romanticized view that if you talk to people long enough, you will get them to come around or at least strike a reasonable compromise. That Republican party doesn't exist anymore. Look what happened to Liz Cheney when she stood up to Donald Trump and the Big Lie. There are some Republicans who will stand up to big lie, but they are few and far in between. And the Republicans here in leadership in Washington, leadership in state Republican parties, leadership in the governor's office who are passing these laws around the country, they know the election was not stolen. They know there was no fraud. But they continue to use — no widespread fraud — but they continue to push these laws because these laws, Victor, guarantee more Republican power. If you have fewer drop boxes in Harris County, Texas then fewer blacks and Latinos vote or it's harder for them to vote. And so on and so forth. So, if you allow politicians to look at the results of the election as opposed to, you know, than neutral parties and say I don't like who won, we have the right to change it, that's simply dangerous. The President is right about that. That's one of the more nefarious things in some of these state laws. The question is what can you do about it? And the President, if he would change his own mind and lean on members of his own party, he might lose. They might not — they might not change their mind, but he would put his shoulder into that fight. We don't see a willingness to do that. So, I think the big question is going to be, A, can they win in the courts? The recent Supreme Court decision makes that most unlikely. We'll watch as some of these state challenges come up through the federal court and they get there. And then, number two, the President will get some blow back from this, some public and private that he didn't go after the filibuster. Can they get the proof in the pudding? Will they raise the money to educate all these Democratic voters? Can they prove the Republicans wrong at the polls next year? We're in the early chapter of this fight, but if you're a Democrat or if you're just an advocate of voting rights who's an independent or a Republican or whatever, you're losing.

CAMEROTA: Bakari, I mean, though, what can we do about it? You're talking about the filibuster. You know, Senators Kyrsten Sinema and Joe Manchin have said that, if you change it

now, it can be used against Democrats in future. That's part of their reluctance to change anything about the filibuster, to do anything about.

SELLERS: That's also outwardly asinine because you're going to have a question or have a speech about the fierce urgency of now, understanding this moment, if democracy's at stake, then you even carve out to take advantage of the moment that you're in. But I have to address what Victor and John and the conversation they just had. Look, why do we have to go back to the ballot box? Democrats have the House, the Senate, and the White House. You have majorities. Like, if you don't want to govern, then why are we coming out to vote for you? Why are we standing in lines for hours to send Warnock and Ossoff to the United States Senate if you're not going to pass voting rights? Why are we doing all of these things and organizing in the streets? Why do you have William Barber and LaTosha Brown and the NAACP and all of these different organizations — HBCUs and the links and the AKAs coming out in huge numbers, all your fraternities and sororities coming out in huge numbers to support you if you're not going to do anything. Like, if you're not going to — to — if you're not going to reschedule marijuana, if you're not going to pass voting rights, if you're not going to give us criminal justice reform, if you're not going to do the things we put you in office for, then what this is about? I understand the clarion call of the issue. There's not one person in this country who — who voted for the Democratic Party, who voted for this majority that does not understand how important this issue is. But now, Chuck Schumer, Nancy Pelosi, Joe Biden and Kamala Harris are in charge of Washington, D.C. And the question is, if we gave you the majority and you're not going to do anything, why does it matter?

BLACKWELL: Kaitlan Collins, I saw you wanted to add something there.

COLLINS: I just want to note that one part of this speech, in addition to what's coming next and what the President personally is going to push for, I think part of the goal was to bring everyone back down to reality, to look at these election laws being enacted all across the nation that are based on nothing. There was no widespread fraud in the 2020 election. And the President made clear it was one of the safest and most secure in our nation's history. Election experts have said that all across the board and he was speaking directly to Trump without naming him when he was saying you cannot deny the outcome of an election just because you did not like it. That's what is essentially happening here. And that's what you're seeing Republicans push across the board. So, while we are seeing the calls from Democrats for new federal legislation so they can override some of these state laws that they feel are too restrictive and are going to block people from actually voting, you have to also remember the root of this entire issue is Donald Trump. And former President Trump pushing those election law lies that is now spurred on Republicans across the board to do so as well even though they are based on absolutely nothing. And I think that was one part of his speech that we haven't seen President Biden say or really try to hammer home. Yes, he's noted it before and talked about the Big Lie. But I think part of that, just breaking that down with something that was also a new effort, maybe just symbolic from the White House but to really dispel this notion there was any actual fraud that happened in the election that needs to be corrected with these new state laws.

BLACKWELL: The President said “the merchants of fear and peddlers of lies are threatening the

foundation of our country.” A little more than 20 minutes the President spoke there at the National Constitution Center.