

# An SFL Approach to Biden's Inauguration Speech after Winning the Presidential Election: Compensation

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## Abstract

The US election is an influential event, not just in the USA itself but in the world. The present study aims to analyze Joe Biden's inauguration speech after winning the presidential election in January 2021 and becoming the 46<sup>th</sup> president of the United States. Moreover, this paper attempts to investigate the USA's possible policies toward their own nation and, of course, the other countries. This analysis goes through predicting probable upcoming policies of Biden's administration comparing to the previous president of the USA, Donald Trump, who breached several international agreements. To this end, Halliday's systemic functional linguistics (SFL) (Halliday, 1978; Halliday & Matthiessen, 2014) has been employed in Biden's first speech after winning the election and beginning of the democratic administration to observe his political intentions by means of a critical approach and using appraisal resources of Martin and White (2007) to clarify the attitude, graduation, and engagement of his speech. Overall, designating the number of vocabularies related to any of the mentioned appraisal resources, it is concluded that Biden's tendency, based on his inauguration speech and the lexical and grammatical ('lexicogrammar') choices, is to compensate Trump's actions, such as breaching 2015 JCPOA agreement and breaking 2015 Paris Climate Accord, and make peace with whom Trump had fueled conflicts.

**Keywords:** Biden, Critical Discourse Analysis, Political Discourse Analysis, Systemic Functional Linguistics

## 1. Introduction

The utterances of the US presidents have always been of significant importance and investigated by other nations' authorities. This demonstrates the USA impact on the world – politically, economically, and culturally. In the same line, many scholars have employed different approaches to US presidents' utterances. For example, Rasool Moradi-Joz et al (2019) approached to Trump's 2017 UN speech using conductive argumentation and indicated that Trump's speech could denote delegitimizing Iranian government.

One way for conducting such investigations is to approach the given texts/discourses critically. Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA), as illustrated in Norman Fairclough (2010), aims to find the possible relations between the entities (people, objects, or concepts) in a group. Besides, CDA attempts to take the dialectic into account to make sure those relations are in a rational manner. Moreover, in regards to CDA's transdisciplinary property, this analysis process connects the entities of one group to another.

Furthermore, for having a critical approach toward discourses, there are several approaches such as Dialectical-Relational Approach (DRA) worked by Norman Fairclough (2009), Sociocognitive Approach (SCA) worked by Teun A. Van Dijk (2014), Discourse-Historical Approach (DHA) worked by Ruth Wodak (2015), Dispositive Analysis Approach (DPA) introduced by Michael Foucault and worked by many scholars like Jäger & Maier (2009) , Jürgen Link et al. (2008) , etc., Corpus Linguistic Approach (CorpLingA) worked by scholars like Stubbs (2001), Baker (2019), and so on.

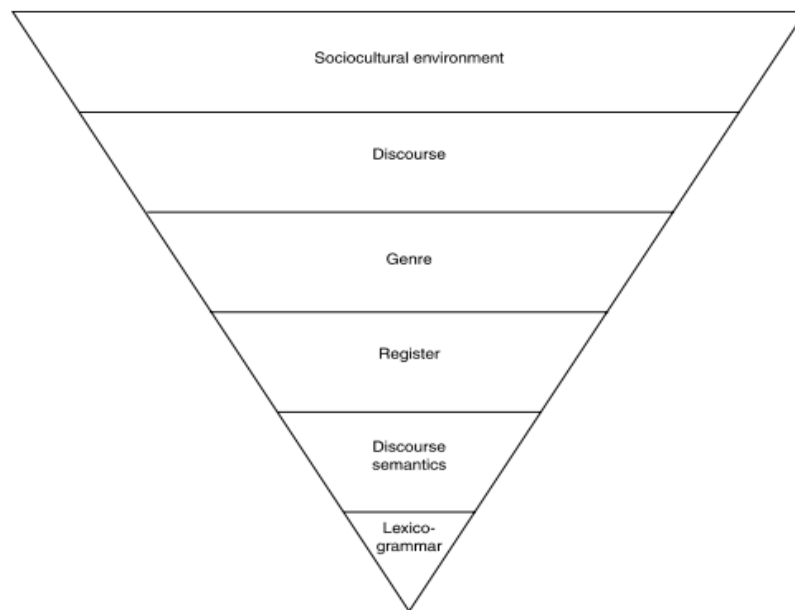
In this paper, Halliday's systemic functional linguistics (Halliday, 1978; Halliday & Matthiessen, 2014), henceforth SFL, as one of the first means of analyzing texts critically, has been interpolated in Biden's speech after winning the US presidential election to check the inner layers of his words.

According to Abrahamian (1982), the deterioration of the US-Iran relationship, as an instance of Trump's violating policies, dates back to World War II so forth. This relationship plunged, specially, during and after the Iranian Revolution in 1979 up until 2015 that parties agreed on Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA). But, after Donald Trump took the administration, everything went through deep changes and here is the point where fueled the importance of Joe Biden's win in the presidential election and, therefore, unraveling his inauguration speech. To this end, in the following, first and foremost, SFL and its elements will be discussed.

## 2. SFL and its Elements

As the name itself implies, Systemic Functional Linguistics goes under the functional theories wherein the purpose of the produced texts is to serve specific goals. The 'systemic' part roots in the Saussure's ideas; that is, the scholars analyze how language works (Almurashi, 2016; Ballard, 1980; Halliday et al., 2014). Thus, SFL goes through the structures of texts and tries to find out the real intentions veiled under the forms; this means, the linguistic choice of the interlocutor while communicating is based on the concepts s/he intends to convey. In the following, the elements of SFL will be explained.

Retrieved from Munday (2016), in Figure 2.1, the relations between the linguistic choices, the aims of the communication, and the social framework has been illustrated in which the direction is top down; including 'sociocultural environment' on top, 'discourse', 'genre', 'register', 'discourse semantics', and finally, at the bottom, 'lexicogrammar' (Halliday et al., 2014; Matthiessen, 2002; Munday, 2016).



**Figure 2. 1. The Hallidayan model of language (Retrieved from Munday's *Introducing Translation Studies*)**

As it is obvious in Figure 2.1, every component in any layer is related to the concepts of the stratum below itself, i.e., Register – which here is different than the conventional sense – is composed of three variables (Munday, 2016):

1. Field: what is being written about;
2. Tenor: who is communicating and to whom;
3. Mode: the form of communication.

These variables themselves are associated with 'discourse semantics' known as 'metafunctions' (ibid.):

1. Ideational: provides a representation of the world or an event;
2. Interpersonal: enacts social relations;
3. Textual: makes a text hang together in a coherent way.

Now, in order to employ these elements and concepts in this research, another tool within the same theory (functional) deems practical to use which is ‘appraisal framework’ wherein interlocutors express their dis/approval toward entities (Martin, J. R., & White, P. R., 2005). To this end, the table below will pave the way to analyze the aforementioned speech in this article retrieved from Evaluation in Translation (Munday, 2012) – also see Martin, J. R., & White, P. R., 2007.

**Table 2. 1. Appraisal resources (retrieved from Munday, 2012; adopted from Martin and White, 2007)**

Domain of appraisal	Parameter	Value	Illustrative realization
Attitude	Affect	Through feelings and emotional reactions	Happy, sad
	Judgment	Of ethics, behavior, capacity	Wrong, brave
	Appreciation	Of things, phenomena, reactions	Beautiful, authentic
Graduation	Force	Raise	<b>Extremely</b> unwise
		Lower	<b>Slightly</b> corrupt
	Focus	Sharpen	A <b>true</b> father
Engagement		Soften	An apology <b>of sorts</b>
	Monogloss	Contraction	Demonstrate, show
	Heterogloss	Expansion	Claim, nearly, possibly

Thus, in the following, ‘appraisal resources’ of President Biden’s speech will be analyzed and entered in a table like Table 2.1.

### 3. Analyzing Biden’s Inauguration Speech

Winning the presidential election in January 2020, Joe Biden became the 46<sup>th</sup> president of the United States of America. Considering Trump’s actions at national and international levels, eyes from all over the world was on that election and Biden’s following speech. Therefore, that speech was of great importance for the future of the USA.

As explained above, in the framework of the SFL approach and employing the appraisal resources of White, this speech will be analyzed in three domains: a) attitude, b) graduation, and c) engagement; and their subbranches.

#### 3.1. Attitude

Attitude is one the domains of appraisal. According to the Oxford Dictionary, attitude is the way that you think and feel about somebody/something; the way that you behave towards somebody/something that illustrates how you think and feel. So, in general, it is a mental state of feelings, beliefs, and values toward something/someone which makes one respond accordingly in every given context. It is, according to White (2005), of three parameters: affect, judgment, and appreciation, which will be explained and analyzed in Biden’s speech in the coming paragraphs.

##### 3.1.1. Affect

Affect is the impression, feeling, and emotion responses toward a phenomenon. In Biden’s speech, the following words, phrases, and expressions can be found (the numbers in parentheses denote the sentences in which they are used):

**Table 3.1. Examples of affect in Biden’s inauguration speech**

Humbled (5), work with all my heart / win the confidence (8), to restore the soul of America (11), To rebuild the backbone of the nation (12), honor of my lifetime (14), They are my heart. (18), I will be honored (21), I owe you everything. (25), disappointment (34), effort/ commitment (55), grim era of demonization (57), cooperate (58, 2x in 60), steady widening of opportunity (62), inflection points (65), save (66), pledging (68), stand again (69), defeat/build/prosperity/purpose (70), comfort/solace/hopefully (91)
--

Biden, in his speech, has tried to impact on the audience as much as feasible. He has shown humility by saying *humbled* (5) and *pledging* (68). Besides, he has tried to show a teamwork rather than working alone ordering the others which symbolizes unity in his government; examples for this claim could be *cooperate* (58, 2x in 60). His words are full of hope which draws people’s attention. He says *work with all my heart* (8), *to rebuild the backbone of nation* (12), *steady widening of opportunity* (62) and so on.

He mentions some negative, saddening issues to portray the darkness of the previous administration, at least in his own opinion, so that his hopeful words will affect even more on the population. *Grim era of demonization* (57) and *inflection points* (65) are just two examples showing his opinion on the present stance of the USA and his plans to improve it.

##### 3.1.2. Judgment

The second parameter of attitude is judgment by which the interlocutors make decisions considering the best option to behave based on. The words in Table 3.2. are some examples of this parameter.

**Table 3.2. Examples of judgment in Biden's inauguration speech**

Trust/ confidence (5), the love and tireless support of Jill (17), fairness (45), racial justice (49), decency/ democracy (50), beleaguered country (67), dignity/respect (83)
--

The new president has employed good-feeling adjectives to judge the concepts and actions he is mentioning. For example, to indicate his gratitude to his family, he has said *the love and tireless support of Jill (17)* which denotes a firm bond between the members of his family and him that the audience will be convinced that this unity can be extended to the whole body of the country.

The point, in this regard, is that, he has the least negative judgments in his speech which seems wise and shows his dominance on the discourses going on among the people.

### 3.1.3. Appreciation

The last parameter in this domain is evaluating the phenomena and processes called appreciation; to consider one's opinions toward the value of something.

**Table 3.3. Examples of appreciation in Biden's inauguration speech**

fellow Americans (1), To make America respected around the world again/ to unite us (13), fantastic vice president (21), fantastic vice president (23), special thanks (24), I am proud of (26), full hearts and steady hands/ faith in America and in each other/ a love of country/ a thirst for justice (97), united (98), strengthened (99), healed (100)
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Using adjectives *fellow (1)*, *fantastic (21, 23)*, *united (98)*, *healed (100)*, etc. indicates another positive action from Biden who has concentrated on giving good impression to the listeners of his speech.

Generally, the predominant attitude toward the phenomena is positive rather than negative so that he can convince the audience for a better and constructive future of the United States and there will be a high probability of compensating previous actions.

### 3.2 Graduation

Graduation, as the second domain of appraisal, is the intensity of phenomena – both objectively and conceptually. There are two parameters for this domain: force and focus.

#### 3.2.1. Force

Force is the physical intensity or amount of something. In the following table, examples are provided.

**Table 3.4. Examples of force in Biden's inauguration speech**

a clear victory/ A convincing victory (2), fought so hard for so many years (22), harsh rhetoric (37), To lower the temperature (38), marshal (2x in 45), hard decisions (65), the whole world (76), possibility (80), terrible (91), God and history have called upon us to do. (96)
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Biden has intensified the actions using emphatic adjectives and phrases both for adversities and successes, as are clear in Table 3.4.

#### 3.2.2. Focus

Focus, in contrast to force, is mostly conceptual and emotional intensity of some phenomena, to some extent, to clarify and specify some action or concept.

**Table 3.5. Examples of focus in Biden's inauguration speech**

a great day/ a great first lady (20), a time to build/a time to reap/a time to sow/ a time to heal (42), a fair shot (50), most precious moments (52), a bedrock of science /out of compassion, empathy, and concern (54), part of the mandate (60), a great nation (87), a good people (88)
--

In order to indicate exact entities and events, again, Biden has interpolated soft adjectives and phrases for calamities – to assuage the problems imposed on the country and people – and sharp ones to, kind of, exaggerate the strength of his cabinet.

### 3.3. Engagement

Within a given context, to the extent which an utterance is intended and it is perceived, a relationship will take place that is called engagement, which is of two kinds: monogloss and heterogloss.

#### 3.3.1. Monogloss

Monogloss indicates the utterances without any external referential, as mentioned in *Corpus-assisted Discourse Studies on the Iraq Conflict* by Donna R. Miller and Jane H. Johnson (2011).

Analyzing the speech, it is obvious that there are not much words unique to Biden and there are lots of metaphors and insinuations instead, which makes the words fall into next category, heterogloss, discussed below.

### 3.3.2. Heterogloss

Vice versa of monogloss, heterogloss refers to the utterances which have insinuations to external concepts and ideas (ibid.).

**Table 3.6. Examples of heterogloss in Biden's inauguration speech**

Who doesn't see red and blue state (7), For that is what America is about: the people (9), To rebuild the backbone of the nation (12), To make America respected around the world again (13), America has bent the arc of the moral universe (22), It's time to put away the harsh rhetoric (37), The Bible tells us that to everything there is a season (42), The battle to build prosperity (47), The battle to secure your family's health care (48), The battle to achieve racial justice and root out systemic racism in this country (49), The battle to save the climate (49), That plan will be built on a bedrock of science (54), battle between our better angels and our darkest impulses (74)

As mentioned before, Biden has used lots of insinuations to external sources, mostly targeting the broken approach of Trump toward the phenomena like economy and coronavirus. He has mentioned previous presidents' words, as well. *The arc of the moral universe* (22) is an allusion to Theodore Parker (1810 – 1860), an American transcendentalist and abolitionist who sought to revitalize social justice and end slavery in the USA, when he predicted the inevitable success of abolitionist cause this way:

I do not pretend to understand the moral universe; the arc is a long one, my eye reaches but little ways; I cannot calculate the curve and complete the figure by the experience of sight; I can divine it by conscience. And from what I see I am sure it bends towards justice. (Theodore Parker, 1875, pp. 84 – 85)

Since Parker was a preacher looking for social justice, he has interpolated these words in his book *Ten Sermons of Religion* (1875) to bolster optimism and hope in his listeners for a better future wherein the "right" will rule. That is why Joe Biden uses such an insinuation to promise, in the faltering international relationships of the USA, prosperity of the people and country – considering his administration and supporter (voters) the "right". Apparently, it seems so fit in the present context in comparison to context wherein Parker had preached.

## 4. Results

According to the abovementioned analysis, considering the domain of attitude, Biden has tried to employ as much positive – in the sense of meaning – vocabulary as he could so that he could give a good first-move impression to the people of the United State – that is, affect. To employ the second parameter in this regard, judgment, he has chosen the words and phrases meticulously to avoid negativity as much as possible so that the audience's attention would be drawn to constructive concepts. Finally, he has appreciated the phenomena aesthetically using, for instance, 'full hearts and steady hands', 'a thirst for justice'.

Taking the second domain of appraisal, graduation, into account, he has tried to raise the force of benevolent activities like 'to fight so many years' for the country and lower the malevolent events like 'to lower the temperature' of ill deeds. In the same vein, the caring intentions are mentioned with positive adjectives such as 'the most precious moment' while he has avoided using deteriorating actions.

In regards to engagement, as the last domain of appraisal, he mostly has insinuated shared knowledge among people like mentioning verses from Bible or metaphors of agricultural concepts which are perceivable by the majority of the people, apparently, to circumvent a scattering language.

## 5. Conclusion

For around four years (since 2016 to 2020), Donald Trump's approach to dealing with the (national and international) issues had troubled the USA itself and many countries with contrasting ideologies in comparison to the ones of United States', e.g., Islamic Republic of Iran – because of breaching JCPOA. That is, this last presidential election of the USA, due to its doubled importance, was of more significance which increased the sensitivity of the elected president's inauguration speech.

Based on the Biden's inauguration speech and given the result of its analysis, it seems Biden will try to alleviate some, if not all, of the restrictions at national and international levels. Apparently, the US policies will be to return to the breached accords to save the USA from the international distrust toward them. In the same vein, as a challenge for Biden, he needs to improve US-Iran relationship, perhaps by returning to JCPOA, as an example of good deeds of the USA.

Overall, it seems the words uttered by Biden fit into the sociocultural environment based on the constructive, compensatory discourse broached by the new administration to take the USA to its so-called friendly stance in the international communities. To this end, the vocabularies and structure serve as a means to achieve the position they used to have.

## Acknowledgements

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## Appendix

Transcript of Biden's inauguration speech, January 2021 (retrieved from The New York Times<sup>1</sup>):

1. My fellow Americans, the people of this nation have spoken.
2. They have delivered us a clear victory. A convincing victory.
3. A victory for "We the People."
4. We have won with the most votes ever cast for a presidential ticket in the history of this nation — 74 million.
5. I am humbled by the trust and confidence you have placed in me.
6. I pledge to be a president who seeks not to divide, but to unify.
7. Who doesn't see red and blue states, but a United States.
8. And who will work with all my heart to win the confidence of the whole people.
9. For that is what America is about: the people.
10. And that is what our administration will be about.
11. I sought this office to restore the soul of America.
12. To rebuild the backbone of the nation — the middle class.
13. To make America respected around the world again and to unite us here at home.
14. It is the honor of my lifetime that so many millions of Americans have voted for this vision.
15. And now the work of making this vision real is the task of our time.
16. As I said many times before, I'm Jill's husband.
17. I would not be here without the love and tireless support of Jill, Hunter, Ashley, all of our grandchildren and their spouses, and all our family.
18. They are my heart.
19. Jill's a mom — a military mom — and an educator.
20. She has dedicated her life to education, but teaching isn't just what she does — it's who she is. For America's educators, this is a great day: You're going to have one of your own in the White House, and Jill is going to make a great first lady.
21. And I will be honored to be serving with a fantastic vice president — Kamala Harris — who will make history as the first woman, first Black woman, first woman of South Asian descent, and first daughter of immigrants ever elected to national office in this country.
22. It's long overdue, and we're reminded tonight of all those who fought so hard for so many years to make this happen. But once again, America has bent the arc of the moral universe towards justice.
23. Kamala, Doug — like it or not — you're family. You've become honorary Bidens and there's no way out.
24. To all those who volunteered, worked the polls in the middle of this pandemic, local election officials — you deserve a special thanks from this nation.
25. To my campaign team, and all the volunteers, to all those who gave so much of themselves to make this moment possible, I owe you everything.
26. And to all those who supported us: I am proud of the campaign we built and ran. I am proud of the coalition we put together, the broadest and most diverse in history.
27. Democrats, Republicans and Independents. Progressives, moderates and conservatives.
28. Young and old.
29. Urban, suburban and rural.
30. Gay, straight, transgender.
31. White. Latino. Asian. Native American.
32. And especially for those moments when this campaign was at its lowest — the African-American community stood up again for me. They always have my back, and I'll have yours.
33. I said from the outset I wanted a campaign that represented America, and I think we did that. Now that's what I want the administration to look like.
34. And to those who voted for President Trump, I understand your disappointment tonight.
35. I've lost a couple of elections myself.
36. But now, let's give each other a chance.
37. It's time to put away the harsh rhetoric.
38. To lower the temperature.
39. To see each other again.
40. To listen to each other again.

41. To make progress, we must stop treating our opponents as our enemy. We are not enemies. We are Americans.
42. The Bible tells us that to everything there is a season — a time to build, a time to reap, a time to sow. And a time to heal.
43. This is the time to heal in America.
44. Now that the campaign is over — what is the people's will? What is our mandate?
45. I believe it is this: Americans have called on us to marshal the forces of decency and the forces of fairness. To marshal the forces of science and the forces of hope in the great battles of our time.
46. The battle to control the virus.
47. The battle to build prosperity.
48. The battle to secure your family's health care.
49. The battle to achieve racial justice and root out systemic racism in this country. The battle to save the climate.
50. The battle to restore decency, defend democracy, and give everybody in this country a fair shot.
51. Our work begins with getting Covid under control.
52. We cannot repair the economy, restore our vitality, or relish life's most precious moments — hugging a grandchild, birthdays, weddings, graduations, all the moments that matter most to us — until we get this virus under control.
53. On Monday, I will name a group of leading scientists and experts as transition advisers to help take the Biden-Harris Covid plan and convert it into an action blueprint that starts on Jan. 20, 2021.
54. That plan will be built on a bedrock of science. It will be constructed out of compassion, empathy, and concern.
55. I will spare no effort — or commitment — to turn this pandemic around.
56. I ran as a proud Democrat. I will now be an American president. I will work as hard for those who didn't vote for me — as those who did.
57. Let this grim era of demonization in America begin to end — here and now.
58. The refusal of Democrats and Republicans to cooperate with one another is not due to some mysterious force beyond our control.
59. It's a decision. It's a choice we make.
60. And if we can decide not to cooperate, then we can decide to cooperate. And I believe that this is part of the mandate from the American people. They want us to cooperate.
61. That's the choice I'll make. And I call on the Congress — Democrats and Republicans alike — to make that choice with me.
62. The American story is about the slow, yet steady widening of opportunity.
63. Make no mistake: Too many dreams have been deferred for too long.
64. We must make the promise of the country real for everybody — no matter their race, their ethnicity, their faith, their identity, or their disability.
65. America has always been shaped by inflection points — by moments in time where we've made hard decisions about who we are and what we want to be.
66. Lincoln in 1860 — coming to save the Union.
67. F.D.R. in 1932 — promising a beleaguered country a New Deal.
68. J.F.K. in 1960 — pledging a New Frontier. And 12 years ago — when Barack Obama made history — and told us, "Yes, we can."
69. We stand again at an inflection point.
70. We have the opportunity to defeat despair and to build a nation of prosperity and purpose.
71. We can do it. I know we can.
72. I've long talked about the battle for the soul of America.
73. We must restore the soul of America.
74. Our nation is shaped by the constant battle between our better angels and our darkest impulses.
75. It is time for our better angels to prevail.
76. Tonight, the whole world is watching America. I believe at our best America is a beacon for the globe.
77. And we lead not by the example of our power, but by the power of our example.
78. I've always believed we can define America in one word: possibilities.
79. That in America everyone should be given the opportunity to go as far as their dreams and God-given ability will take them.
80. You see, I believe in the possibility of this country.
81. We're always looking ahead.
82. Ahead to an America that's freer and more just.
83. Ahead to an America that creates jobs with dignity and respect.
84. Ahead to an America that cures disease — like cancer and Alzheimers.
85. Ahead to an America that never leaves anyone behind.
86. Ahead to an America that never gives up, never gives in.
87. This is a great nation.
88. And we are a good people.

89. This is the United States of America.
90. And there has never been anything we haven't been able to do when we've done it together. In the last days of the campaign, I've been thinking about a hymn that means a lot to me and to my family, particularly my deceased son, Beau. It captures the faith that sustains me and which I believe sustains America.
91. And I hope it can provide some comfort and solace to the more than 230,000 families who have lost a loved one to this terrible virus this year. My heart goes out to each and every one of you. Hopefully this hymn gives you solace as well.
92. "And He will raise you up on eagle's wings,
93. Bear you on the breath of dawn,
94. Make you to shine like the sun,
95. And hold you in the palm of His Hand."
96. And now, together — on eagle's wings — we embark on the work that God and history have called upon us to do.
97. With full hearts and steady hands, with faith in America and in each other, with a love of country — and a thirst for justice — let us be the nation that we know we can be.
98. A nation united.
99. A nation strengthened.
100. The United States of America.
101. God bless you.
102. And may God protect our troops.

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## Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> <https://www.nytimes.com/article/biden-speech-transcript.html>