

# **Biden, in First Major Speech Since Leaving Office, Warns of Trump's 'Destruction'**

*The former president criticized Trump and called for protecting Social Security*

**By Annie Linskey**  
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CHICAGO—The last time [Joe Biden](#) took a stage in Chicago was to keynote the opening day of the Democratic National Convention. Then a sitting U.S. president, he symbolically handed over power to his vice president as thousands of grateful Democrats cheered and waved signs.

This time, with significantly less pomp and ceremony, the now former president took a stage here to keynote the opening day of a far lower-profile event: A two-day conference for disability advocates. It was his first widely publicized public remarks since leaving the White House.

Speaking for about 30 minutes to about 200 people gathered here for a conference sponsored by the Advocates, Counselors, and Representatives for the Disabled, Biden focused his remarks on threats to Social Security and touted his efforts as president to bolster it.

“Social Security is more than a government program,” Biden, 82, told the group, gathered in a dark third-floor hotel ballroom in downtown Chicago. “It’s a sacred promise.”

Without ever mentioning his successor by name, he accused President Trump, 78, of seeking to gut the Social Security program and of creating fear and uncertainty among its recipients. “Fewer than 100 days, and this administration has done so much damage and so much destruction,” Biden said. “It’s kind of breathtaking.”

Trump and his advisers, including billionaire [Elon Musk](#), have asserted that Social Security benefits are being distributed to people who are recorded in the system as being well over 100 years old. Biden scoffed at that idea, joking

that he would like to meet some of these individuals to learn from them about longevity.

A 2023 inspector general report found that 18.9 million people born in 1920 or before were in the Social Security system, with no information listed about their deaths. But the report said that very few were actually receiving Social Security payments.

Amid Musk's push to streamline government, the Social Security Administration [is cutting staff](#), restricting what recipients can do over the phone and [closing some local field offices](#) that help people in person.

White House press secretary Karoline Leavitt, referencing an expected line of attack about GOP threats to Social Security ahead of Biden's speech, said Tuesday morning that Trump will protect benefits for "law-abiding, taxpaying American citizens and seniors who paid into the program."

Leavitt added: "He campaigned on it. He protected it in his first term and he's back again to continue protecting it."

Shortly before Biden spoke on Tuesday, Trump released a memo directing his administration to prevent immigrants in the country illegally from obtaining Social Security benefits and expanding the number of prosecutors focused on Social Security fraud.

Biden's speech wasn't the kind of legacy-shaping address that public figures sometimes deliver after beginning their next acts.

Instead, Biden was now doing something else that former presidents do: Giving a paid speech to an advocacy group. Representatives from ACRD and from Biden's team declined to say how much the former president was paid for the address.

During his remarks, Biden also took aim at the tone of the new administration, saying it is out-of-touch with American values. Americans, he said "don't see empathy as a sign of weakness" and "don't see cruelty as a sign of strength."

Other speeches during the two-day program focused on more pedestrian issues, including telemarketing rules. One session was titled "Increasing Profitability with Intake Scoring: Effective Methods for Success" and another

was called “Turning Tension into Trust: Effective Approaches to Handling Disgruntled Clients.”

The organizing group ACRD billed the speech as Biden’s first public remarks since leaving the White House, a notion that Biden’s team disputed. Biden has spoken at two other public events since leaving the White House. Neither was widely publicized ahead of time.

When Barack Obama left the White House he gave his first public remarks around the same time—in April—at a forum on civil engagement at the University of Chicago.

Leavitt, on Tuesday, couldn’t resist a dig at Biden’s age. “I’m shocked that he’s speaking at nighttime,” she said. “I thought his bedtime was much earlier than his speech tonight.” Biden’s speech started shortly after 5 p.m. local time.

But Biden sounded rested. His voice came across more clearly than it had during his final weeks in office. He had a teleprompter, though he appeared to veer from prepared remarks from time to time. Before giving his remarks, he posed for photos with staff and some friends.

On stage, he whispered at times and then raised his voice, a technique he used during his presidency to emphasize a point.

“Everyone deserves to be treated with simple dignity,” Biden boomed into the microphone. “It’s who we are as Americans.”

Toward the end of his address, Biden ruminated over the current state of the country. “We can’t go on like this as a divided nation,” the former president said. Referencing his decades of public service, he concluded: “It’s never been this divided.”