

Mike Pence speaks to ERLC event about politics, prayer

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INDIANAPOLIS (RNS)—Former Vice President Mike Pence addressed Southern Baptists at a luncheon event focused on public service where he criticized President Joe Biden, questioned the future of the Republican Party and upheld faith as the answer for the country's problems.

He spoke during a June 11 luncheon held at a hotel across the street from the annual meeting of the Southern Baptist Convention with Brent Leatherwood, president of the SBC's Ethics & Religious Liberty Commission.

After trumpeting his role in the Trump administration's appointment of justices who "sent *Roe v. Wade* to the ash heap of history," Pence made it clear that he has found nothing to appreciate about the current presidency.

"I've never voted for Joe Biden," he said. "I can't think of a thing he's done that I agree with. And I've known Joe Biden a long time.

"And, I mean, there's a big debate over the president's condition, ability to do the job. Let me just assure you, Joe Biden has always been that wrong. I mean, that's not new."

Some of the audience, about 400 people dining on boxed lunches of turkey sandwiches, pasta salad and chocolate chip cookies, laughed, and even more applauded the overturning of the constitutional right to legal abortion in the United States two years ago.

Pence, who was drawn to the Republican Party during the Ronald Reagan era, said he's focused on "traditional conservative values" and advocating

for them through his Advancing American Freedom, a foundation he created in 2021. But he sees division in his political party.

“The influential men and women in this room need to know there’s also a very healthy debate within my party about whether we’re going to stay on the course of a strong national defense of American leadership in the world, of limited government and balanced budgets, traditional moral values, the right to life and an affirmation of religious liberty and marriage,” he said, “or whether we’re going to start to move in another direction.”

Not the end of debate over life

One of those divides, he said, is future legislation about abortion at every level of U.S. political life.

“I honestly think we haven’t come to the end of the debate over life: We’ve come to the end of the beginning,” Pence said. “I think the destiny of this nation is inextricably linked to whether we restore the sanctity of life to the center of American law.”

Leatherwood asked Pence how he deals with personal attacks, including about decisions that have made headlines, such as to not dine alone with a woman not his wife.

Pence drew laughter again when he described then-President Donald Trump’s reaction to a news story about that personal policy when they were with his team in the Oval Office: “He goes, ‘Can you all believe it? After everything they said about me, they’re attacking Mike Pence for being faithful to his wife.’”

But Pence included a clarification for those in Tuesday’s audience who did not know the history of that choice of personal behavior.

“It wasn’t Mike Pence’s rule. It’s the Billy Graham rule,” he said, referring to the famed evangelist. “When we got busy in public life, Karen and I sat down and just made some decisions about putting our marriage and our families first and that was one of them.”

Pence said he and Trump may never agree on the decision Pence made to support the outcome of the 2020 election—even as election deniers attacked the Capitol on Jan. 6, 2021, some threatening his life. But Pence said he focuses on the faith on which he relied then and now.

“I know it’s God’s grace that saw us through that day,” he said.

‘Pray for America’

Leatherwood asked Pence if he had any advice for approaching the upcoming election, as research has shown that most Americans do not want a presidential rematch between Biden and Trump.

“If there was a time to go back to that pulpit and tell your folks pray for America, it’d be now,” the former vice president said, adding that repentance is also necessary.

He recommended “calling our neighbors and friends, not just the people out there that disagree with us openly, that don’t embrace our faith in Jesus Christ, but I’m talking about including people who do and say let’s all examine our hearts and see how it is that we can, in our own lives, have a change of heart that will inspire the nation.”

Pence expressed his gratitude for those in the audience who are leading and preaching to congregations across the country.

“I want you all to know how grateful I am for the role that you play in the lives of families and communities that you serve,” he said. “I will always believe that the pulpits that you speak behind are infinitely more valuable

to the life of this nation than any podium that I've ever had the privilege to stand on."

Trump speaks via video prior to SBC

The day before Pence spoke to the ERLC luncheon, former President Donald Trump delivered a prerecorded video message to Southern Baptists attending a luncheon in Indianapolis sponsored by the Danbury Institute prior to the SBC annual meeting.

Trump—the presumptive Republican nominee for president—thanked those assembled for their “tremendous devotion to God and country” and their “tremendous support of me.”

He described the United States as a “declining nation” under the Biden administration, and he offered his partisan remedy.

“We can’t afford for anyone to sit on the sidelines,” Trump said. “Now is the time for us to all pull together and to stand up for our values and for our freedoms, and you just can’t vote Democrat. They’re against religion. They’re against your religion in particular. You cannot vote for Democrats, and you to have to get out and vote.”

With additional reporting by Managing Editor Ken Camp.