

Transcript: Mayor Eric Adams Appears on MSNBC's "Morning Joe"

April 7, 2022

Mika Brzezinski: Joining us now, New York City Mayor Eric Adams. Also with us, the host of MSNBC's Politics Nation, President of the National Action Network, Reverend Al Sharpton, and member of the New York Times editorial board, Mara Gay is with us as well. Great to have you all on-board.

Joe Scarborough: Mr. Mayor, would like to talk about your city, but we're really shallow.

Brzezinski: We're going to.

Scarborough: We're focused on Reverend Al's suit right now. Sort of poplin, lightweight. Looking good.

Brzezinski: Looking for reasons to smile.

Scarborough: So, listen, I got to ask you all something. I'm a little like comfortable.

Brzezinski: Why?

Scarborough: Because, Rev, the mayor, he told the beach story. And we all learn in Sunday school that you're walking down the beach and there're two sets of footprints until you get to the tough times and there's only one set of footprints and you're like, "Jesus, why weren't you there with me?" Right?

Scarborough: And Willy will always answer, "Because I was carrying you, my son." That's what Jesus said. That's what he said about you. Now do you think it's safe for a mayor to substitute Jesus Christ in this story with the Reverend Al Sharpton?

Reverend Al Sharpton: No. Well, you have to have the context. He was opening our convention yesterday, our National Action Network convention. And he was saying that he had gone through certain things and I helped to carry him. What he was saying was because I was a minister, [inaudible] Jesus. Jesus was carrying me and using my arms to help carry him.

Brzezinski: I think that's lovely.

Sharpton: He was in direct order. He knew his theology. He knew what to do.

Brzezinski: See?

Willie Geist: Rev is a vessel, you see. He's a vessels.

Scarborough: He is a vessel. A vessel of the spirit.

Mayor Eric Adams: And that's what the Bible is about.

Sharpton: Jesus is using my arms.

Mayor Adams: The Bible is about parables. In every story in the Bible you should see yourself. And when you take Jesus and the parables out of your life, then you don't truly reflect on those lessons we've learned in Sunday school. I can see them all the time, even what we're going through now with violence, and people have a level of uncertainty. The possibilities are there and we need to look towards God again in our city and country.

Scarborough: There you go.

Sharpton: That's true

Scarborough: I have been corrected, haven't I?

Mara Gay: I think we all need to get back to church.

Scarborough: We're here. We're right here.

Sharpton: We got to bring the parable home. How many mornings do I get and watch Mika carry you?

Scarborough: I know. It's all the time.

Gay: Yeah. Can't dispute that. No.

Scarborough: Her shoulders are weary. Weary. Weary. All right. So we've seen one senseless killing after another, one tragedy after another. A couple days ago, of course you held a press conference. I think a young 15-year-old boy was shot. And you were like, "How long?"

Scarborough: Let's talk about the challenges of... I know you're only a hundred days in, but what are some of the biggest obstacles right now to making the city safer, making the subway safe again? What are some of your biggest challenges?

Mayor Adams: Well, the young man was 12, and sitting in the living room with the family I wish we could have had the entire city and country hear their mother talk about the loss of her son. And I've heard it far too often. And let's be clear, these are problems, are decades in the making. I say over and over again using the analogy, there are many rivers that are feeding the sea of violence in our city and in our country. And we have to dam each river. And we are doing our job in the New York City Police Department.

Mayor Adams: We took over 1,000 guns off the street this year, almost 10 a day. You see what's happening in Chicago. Last year, they took over 12,000 guns off the street. So it's a combination of intervention and prevention that I talk about all the time. We're doing our jobs on the ground, our offices. My anti-gun unit made over 130-something arrests. And the real troubling part, many of them were repeat offenders.

Mayor Adams: And so we're going to continue to do our job, but we need help. We need help from Washington DC. We need help from Albany. And we need help to make sure that we get the support to help these officers who are on the ground.

Gay: I just wanted to ask, Mr. Mayor, one of the interesting and tragic things that's happening in the country right now is you see crime is up across the country, not just in New York where there's been so much discussion of the bail law. And so we really actually, as a country, don't even fully understand the causes of crime, which is why when you say there are many rivers that feed it, that's exactly right. I know you've talked about summer jobs programs. But beyond that, really, what does your administration plan to do about the other potential causes of disruption that are feeding this violence, which clearly has coincided with the pandemic more than any one law or a policy change?

Mayor Adams: No, so true. And we have witnessed before the increase in crime across the country, and the solutions started in New York. We started the process of turning around the lack of safety nationally, and we're going to do it again. But you're right. Number one, when we put in place our dyslexia screening, it's unbelievable that 30% of inmates in our country are dyslexic. We have one high school on Staten Island to deal with dyslexia. We want to make sure we have it across the boroughs. Learning disabilities, 48% of the prisoners at Rikers Island have a learning disability. 80% don't have a high school diploma.

Mayor Adams: Education is one of the feeders. We failed. 65% of Black and brown children never reach proficiency in the city. So when you start correlating with the failing policies in the city, it feeds these crimes. And then the pandemic, the mental health issues after the pandemic is so real. I mean, when you have someone put human waste in someone's face, attack someone with a hammer, you're seeing the outcome of the failure of how we treated people during the pandemic, and we're seeing the results of that.

Mayor Adams: But I'm not stating that because we're not getting the help in Albany or if we don't get help in Albany or Washington that we don't have the obligation and responsibility to make our city safe. And, Mara, it's more than the bail law. People use just a bail law. It's not. It's earned income tax credits. I need victory there. I need to make sure that mothers can have childcare so they can return to work to get our economy back up and operating. So it's more than just one part of my blueprint in gun violence. It's a holistic approach so we can get it right.

Geist: You mentioned, Mr. Mayor, again, the frustration of police officers with the bail law that was put in place in 2019, which waived cash bail for some nonviolent offenses.

It looks like in the new state budget, there are going to be some changes to that law. What would those mean, practically? Would that be helpful to your officers? Would it be helpful to you?

Mayor Adams: Yeah. And you're right. And it's about rebuilding the trust. We sent a mixed message to police officers while they were doing their job. After making arrests, we were unwilling to prosecute cases. We had a bottleneck court system where too many dangerous people were not having their day in court. So what we must look at, the various areas of these laws. Number one, we can't continue to encourage adults giving juvenile guns. That's what we're doing right now.

Mayor Adams: There's a climate on the street that carrying a gun is no longer an illegal act, and we have to stop that. We need to look at the discovery process. I'm hoping that they examine the discovery process, something that many people don't know, but it's a major impact for district attorneys to produce the evidence and turn it over in a timely manner. We have to look at repeated offenders. There's only a small number of people who are driving crime in our city and in the country. They're repeated offenders. And if we don't zero in on them, you're going to constantly see this problem of gun-

Geist: So you support a change to the bail law to keep that kind of person off the street?

Mayor Adams: Yes. Yes. I believe that we should have a dangerousness standard in the bail law. But we need to also look at those other areas that were clearly laid out.

Scarborough: So, Rev, obviously a balance, whether you're talking about the plain clothes unit, whether you're talking about the bail law. The mayor is trying to go further than some city Council people would like him to go. How is that balance working? You've always talked about the balance between being aggressive when you're talking about making New City streets safe, but at the same time, obviously, pushing reform with police officers, with the force and being concerned about, also, social issues.

Sharpton: He addressed that yesterday at National Action Network, because many of us agree that we cannot go back to what we faced under the era of stop-and-frisk and broken windows and, as I stated, a broken trust. But I think that the difference here is that this mayor has been a policeman and a victim of police brutality. So he understands both. He was brutalized as a youngster, as a Black coming up in New York, and he was

a policeman and was shunned by some elements in our community for being a policeman until he proved himself that, "I'm going to be a different kind of cop and fight for that."

Sharpton: I think the thing that I most resent is it's almost like we accept that Blacks and browns are synonymous with criminals and that we don't oppose crime. It's how we do it and how we reimagine it. And I think that's the needle that he's going to have to thread. And I think he cannot do it without people on both sides. The mayor and I talked and I said, "I got questions." He said, "Let's meet." I said, "Some of the civil liberties and civil rights..." "Let's meet," he said, "You know me." 35 years I've been on this side, but some things we have to do.

Sharpton: I will never get three weeks after I did the eulogy for George Floyd, a police brutality victim, I came back to Brooklyn and he was borough president then, running for mayor, and preached the funeral of a one-year-old kid killed with gang violence. So how do I mourn one and act like the other ones should not be dealt with? Is that not the dilemma that you are dealing with?

Mayor Adams: Right. And you know what you hear often people say, "We can't go back to the heavy handed-policing." But we also can't go back to 2,000 homicides a year, 98,000 robberies and 98,000 felonious assaults. So it is comfortable in some circles to say, "We can't go back to heavy-handed policing," but they never finish the sentence. I'm not going to see the city go back to seeing mothers mourn 12-year-old babies. I'm not going to go to a city where we are going to have over-aggressive, heavy-handed policing. But we are going to make sure that crime is not a norm. And it has become a norm because of generational, just really betrayals in our city, and we are going to tackle that.

Gay: I mean, I have to just say that... and I've covered three mayors, and so when I hear you talk about accountability, both to keep crime down but also to hold accountable the police department, it's encouraging. But what I'm personally hoping to see from you is the reforms you plan to put in place within the police department to do that and the kind of transformational change that you've talked about, because you will one day no longer be mayor. And this police department, as you know, needs enormous changes in leadership.

Mayor Adams: Yes. And just remaining biblical, I'm not the choir. I wrote the song. I agree with you. I know the problems in the police department. They're systemic. They're real. But I also know that there are men and women who wear that uniform and they put themselves in harm's way every day. And when I send them out there to do a job, I'm not going to leave them out there, and I'm going to lead them from the front.

Mayor Adams: We need to weed out the bad-acting police officers, but we also need to uplift those officers that go beyond the call of duty. It is a difficult challenge to run in a building that someone is discharging a gun. That's a frightening thing. Look at officer Mora and Rivera. These were two young officers. They were heroes. They are not coming home. And a mother doesn't mourn differently if they lose their child or a dad doesn't mourn differently when they lose a child because of a gang banger or just a violent police officer. We need to stop the violence of innocent people.

Scarborough: So let's continue this discussion and, Mara, jump in as well, if you will. Because we obviously have two issues here. We have rising crime. We have police officers, who, since 2020, have said... not only New York, but across the country, "Politicians don't have our back. We're not going to go in. We're not going to be as aggressive. We're not going to go in to certain areas if we're going to go in and maybe act in a chaotic situation and end up in jail." And then on the other side of it, Mara talking about the police reform.

Scarborough: So how do you implement the dramatic reforms that Mara's talking about, and at the same time... and I can't say this enough, because I keep hearing this from cops everywhere... At the same time, the cops know you've got their back. Good cops know you got their back, that when they put their kids to sleep at 8:00, kiss them on the foreheads, say goodnight to their husband or wife, and they go out into the streets and may not come back the next morning that they know they can do their job and you have their back if something goes wrong as long as they play by the rules.

Mayor Adams: Well said. You know what? The first way to do that is you hire a mayor that needed people to have their backs.

Scarborough: Check. Okay. We did that.

Mayor Adams: Because they wore that uniform. Second, you hire a mayor that spent his entire law enforcement career fighting for the reforms. The reforms people are

talking about right now, they're my reforms. These are the reforms that I introduced. And so what I'm saying to people, you trusted me then to deal with the reforms and law enforcement and safety. I need you to trust me now, and let's work together and make this a safe city.

Scarborough: And, Mara, let's follow up, Mara and then Rev. So talk about some of the biggest concerns about when you hear me saying the cops have to know that the mayor has their backs. What are some of your biggest concerns?

Gay: I don't even know where to begin. I'll tell you this. One concern I have is that we have been holding accountable as a country individual officers. And in many cases, that's the right thing to do. But I actually would really like to see a much broader approach that actually holds accountable those police departments that have been setting the policies that have put, in many cases, their officers and their citizens in harm's path, unnecessarily.

Gay: So that means reforms that actually look at accountability within systems. So we're holding accountable 26-year-old officers. But who were their commanders? You think about the George Floyd protest and the policing there and with the brutality, unnecessarily, that we saw, in my opinion, that the NYPD exercised on peaceful protestors. Well, those individual officers may have executed that. But my question is, what was their commander doing? Where is the accountability there? What is that strategy?

Gay: And so we have been holding accountable the lowest man on the totem pole, so to speak. And I really think that's a big problem, and I'd like to see it addressed in a systemic way. And this is about the professionalizing of police departments across America. Because if you look at the case rates, police are not solving cases in the United States at the rate that they should be. So it's not just a question of brutality, which is important. It's a question of professionalizing police departments and giving police officers the resources that need to do their job well and come home at night.

Brzezinski: Rev?

Scarborough: Rev?

Sharpton: But I think, also, that the resources must be given to people that set a police department that is going to be fair and equal to everyone. Giving resources to the same thing won't solve it. And I think that's where the challenge is for the mayor, who's equipped to do that, to deal with the institutional inside reforms. Because the things that bother many of us that's been on the forefront of this fight is when you end up... yes, police feel threatened. Yes, they go in with their lives at stake. But it seems that the reaction is different based on who it is they're going in.

Sharpton: Why is it most of the no-knock killings happen in the Black and brown community? So you know how to go into white areas or wealthy areas and make sure everything checks, but you go in Black areas with a different attitude. And I think that that goes to her point about, where are the commanders? You've got to change from the inside. We're not going to profile areas. That's where stop-and-frisk didn't work. They were stopping more Blacks and browns, finding nothing. They weren't throwing white kids on the Upper East Side against the wall.

Sharpton: So if you get the racism out of it, which has to come from institutional change inside, where you set goals, monitoring and all of that. And who would know better how to do that than a Black cop who was discriminated against in the NYPD? It comes from the top and it rocks all the way to the bottom, and then we end up marching on the patrolmen rather than his boss that allowed that culture to happen.

Mayor Adams: And it's about, again, opportunities. We have to turn around the economy. That's why we laid out a 70-point blueprint. Tourism is returning to our city. We were able to keep the schools open, despite everyone was stating that we should close.

Mayor Adams: [Inaudible] 20 million test kits of creating a safe environment for our children, bringing back our economy and getting people back to work. I need people back into the office so we can feed the ecosystem of our financial stability in the city. But making my subway system safe, that is why we are dealing with a real true enforcement, but at the same time giving wraparound services to those we are fining. Removing the encampments off our street. There's no dignity in having someone sleep in a tent or a cardboard box. And we're showing people a pathway to having a safe environment in our shelters.

Mayor Adams: So all of this is a holistic approach, and we are laying the foundation of having a city that won't leave anyone behind. And, Mara, I agree with you, some of the institutional changes we must make. It's taken too long to get rid of violent police officers. And I looked at some of those tapes, but I also saw something else on those tapes. I saw a great level of discipline. I saw a large number of officers that, in spite of people spitting on them, throwing stones at them, they showed a level of discipline that I expect. And those who did not, who maced people, who abused people, we need to separate them off our department and make sure they don't come into the department. But we need to uplift those are doing the job correctly/

Geist: So many of these high profile crimes that we see in the paper almost every day, whether on the subway system or attacks on Asian Americans in New York City, are rooted in mental illness, as you just said, if you read through it to the bottom of the story. So what do you do about that problem? What are those humane policies that you're talking about? As you said, there's nothing progressive about letting somebody freeze sleeping over a subway grate. How do you address that problem for their safety, but also for the safety of people riding the subway?

Mayor Adams: And I like that term you used, progressive, because progressive means progress. And progressive is not really just sitting on the sidelines, criticizing. I'm in the streets, 2:00, 3:00 in the morning, talking to homeless, finding out their needs, making sure I can build trust with them. And I don't see a lot of people who criticize taking people into safe haven. They're not out there with me. Number one, we need to create safe spaces for those who are homeless. We need to have wraparound services and support for them when you go out in the street. But you have to send a clear message. It's not acceptable to have people in an inhumane condition, human waste in a tent, drug paraphernalia, no restrooms, no bathroom. This is inhumane.

Scarborough: So what's the next step?

Brzezinski: There's a lot.

Scarborough: I mean, because you go around and you see Washington DC. I mean, it's everywhere in Washington DC. And it just blows my mind that if you talk about this, talk about the indignity and how dangerous it is and how unsanitary it is for people to live like this, people suggest that somehow that's not a progressive.

Mayor Adams: Exactly.

Scarborough: There is nothing progressive about a city not providing safe housing, safe spaces for these people to live.

Brzezinski: And you couldn't walk into a shelter in DC. I mean, we've looked at them. You can't. I mean, that's why they're encampments.

Mayor Adams: That's why I went out to visit my shelters. I wanted to see the product.

Brzezinski: And what did you find?

Mayor Adams: I'm finding clean spaces. I didn't announce I was coming. In the middle of the night, I show up and I said, "I want to walk through the shelter. I want to see the product that you're serving New Yorkers." And that's why we created these brochures. Because I need to go out and talk to homeless one-on-one and say, "I know you have this image of a shelter. Here's where I'm asking you to go, so you could have a visual look." And some people on the street, they can't take care of themselves and they can't make the right decisions. That is why we need a stronger Kendra's Law. I'm asking Albany to do that so we could help people help themselves, because we're not doing it now. We have abandoned New Yorkers and you can be as philosophical as you want and talk about people should have the right to live in the street. No. You should not have the right to live in an undignified manner like that.

Brzezinski: Swinging wildly, but not really. Where does this city stand right now on COVID? How's it going?

Mayor Adams: Slight tick.

Brzezinski: Uptick?

Mayor Adams: COVID is a formidable opponent, and we must pivot and shift. But we have to take our hats off to New Yorkers. Over 75% of the people are vaccinated. People are taking booster shots. We did social distancing. COVID was real. And then you have long-term COVID, where people are dealing with long term illnesses. But we did the right thing. Our economy's back up and operating. We're stabilizing. We have

put the right measures in place. We have the antiviral drugs that we are delivering to the homes of people. I'm just really proud of how New York responded to COVID. We were the epicenter and we put in place some unprecedented things.

Brzezinski: All right. And with that, we just scratched the surface of all the problems that you're dealing with as the Mayor of New York City, and a lot of them being discussed at the National Action, the NAN conference, which is going on right now, Reverend Al. Right?

Sharpton: Right. Today, Hilary Clinton will be addressing our women luncheon. And we're also going to have the Secretary of HUD, who's going to deal with housing, Marcia Fudge, and the Head of Homeland Security. We have several cabinet members. Dr. Michael Eric Dyson and I are going to do a conversation on race. So this is a great day. And then we go through Saturday.

Sharpton: And I would say providentially, others would say coincidentally, we will be in session when the first black woman to the Supreme Court will likely be confirmed. I think they may go to closure today and have the official vote tomorrow. So we'll be celebrating that in the middle of our convention.

Scarborough: How exciting is that? And, Mara, thank you for being here.

Gay: Thanks for having me.

Brzezinski: You look great.

Gay: That was the first time in two years.

Scarborough: It was great to have you in. I understand we're having some problem with the background in your new place. You're welcome to come back any time.

Brzezinski: Keep coming back.

Gay: Crisis. Crisis.

Brzezinski: Thank you all very much.

Mayor Adams: Thank you.

Geist: Thank you.

Scarborough: Thank you, Mr. Mayor.

###