ATLANTA — When he gives the commencement address at Morehouse College, President Joe Biden will have his most direct engagement with college students since the start of the [*Israel-Hamas war*](https://apnews.com/hub/israel-hamas-war) at a center of Black ***politics*** and culture.

Morehouse is located in Atlanta, the largest city in the swing state of Georgia, which Biden flipped from then-President Donald Trump four years ago. Biden's speech Sunday will come as the Democrat tries to make inroads with a key and symbolic constituency — young Black men — and repair the diverse coalition that elected him to the White House.

[*The announcement*](https://apnews.com/article/biden-morehouse-hbcus-2024-election-black-voters-821d03639c2d9ad7d311b3f63541e3ed) of the speech last month triggered peaceful protests and calls for the university administration to cancel over Biden’s handling of the war between Israel and Hamas. Some students at Morehouse and other historically Black campuses in Atlanta say they vociferously oppose Biden and the decision to have him speak, mirroring the tension Biden [*faces in many communities of color*](https://apnews.com/article/arab-americans-reject-biden-election-michigan-palestinians-3c176d111286e767a48d51eef53d50e1) and with [*young voters nationally*](https://apnews.com/article/biden-2024-campaign-oldest-president-young-voters-152d11d3090518a2e5eee63b9a596673).

Morehouse President David Thomas said in an interview that the emotions around the speech made it all the more important that Biden speak.

“In many ways, these are the moments Morehouse was born for,” he said. “We need someplace in this country that can hold the tensions that threaten to divide us. If Morehouse can’t hold those tensions, then no place can.”

The speech comes at a critical moment for Biden in his [*general election rematch*](https://apnews.com/article/biden-trump-president-election-six-months-uncertainty-12e52060e54c8f48be001d159f4a4dcb) against Trump, a Republican. Biden is lagging in support among both Black voters and people under 30, groups that were key to his narrow 2020 victories in several battleground states, including Georgia.

Fifty-five percent of Black adults approved of the way Biden is handling his job as president, according to an AP-NORC Center for Public Affairs Research poll in March, a figure far below earlier in his presidency. Overall, 32% of 18- to 29-year-olds approved in the same poll.

“This is a global catastrophe in Gaza, and Joe Biden coming to pander for our votes is political blackface,” said Morehouse sophomore Anwar Karim, who urged Thomas and school trustees to rescind Biden’s invitation.

Recent scenes on American campuses reflect objections among many young voters about Israel’s assaults in Gaza. Biden has backed Israel since Hamas militants killed more than 1,200 Israelis and took hundreds of hostages on Oct. 7. That includes [*weapons shipments*](https://apnews.com/article/us-israel-arms-gaza-ebe971ca8878ff430ce6458c04151585) to the longstanding U.S. ally, even as Biden advocates for a cease-fire, criticizes Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu’s tactics and the death toll in Gaza surpasses 35,000 people, many of them women and children.

Many younger Black people have identified with the Palestinian cause and have at times drawn parallels between Israeli rule of the Palestinian territories and South Africa’s now-defunct apartheid system and abolished Jim Crow laws in the U.S. Israel rejects claims that its system of laws for Palestinians constitutes apartheid.

“I think that the president will do himself good if he does not duck that, especially when you think about the audience that he will be speaking to directly and to the nation,” Thomas said.

Sunday's speech will culminate a four-day span during which Biden will concentrate on reaching Black communities. On Thursday, Biden [*met privately*](https://apnews.com/article/biden-brown-board-education-anniversary-black-voters-eed04061413b20d3f0549332feff00c7) with plaintiffs from the [*Brown v. Board of Education*](https://apnews.com/article/school-integration-brown-board-supreme-court-9d84858db3717620a77bfae0b478cab8) case that barred legal segregation of America’s public schools. The following day, Biden will address an NAACP gathering commemorating the 70th anniversary of the landmark decision.

Former U.S. Rep. Cedric Richmond, a longtime Biden ally who helped broker his speech at Morehouse, said he understood students’ concerns but emphasized that Biden has pressured Netanyahu and supports a two-state solution for the Israelis and Palestinians. Trump, meanwhile, has effectively abandoned that long-held U.S. position and said Israel should “finish the problem” in Gaza.

“That’s nowhere in the conversation,” Richmond said.

The debate over Biden's speech at Morehouse reflected a fundamental tension of historically Black colleges and universities, which are both dedicated to social justice and Black advancement and run by administrators who are committed to keeping order.

“We look like a very conservative institution” sometimes, Thomas said. “On one hand, the institution has to be the stable object where we are today in the world.”

But, he added, the university's long-term purpose is to “support our students in going out to create a better world.”

Blowback started even before Thomas publicly announced Biden was coming. Faculty sent executives a letter of concern, prompting an online town hall. Alumni gathered several hundred signatures to urge that Thomas rescind Biden’s invitation. The petition called the invitation antithetical to the pacifism Martin Luther King Jr., a Morehouse alumnus, expressed when opposing the Vietnam War.

Some students note that leaders of Morehouse and other HBCUs did not always support King and other Civil Rights activists who are venerated today. Morehouse, for instance, expelled the actor Samuel L. Jackson in 1969 after he and other students held Morehouse trustees, including King’s father, in a campus building as part of demanding curriculum changes and the appointment of more Black trustees.

Students organized two recent protests across the Atlanta University Center (AUC), a consortium of historically Black institutions in Atlanta that includes Morehouse. Chants included “Joe Biden, f— off!” and “Biden, Biden, you can’t hide. We charge you with genocide,” along with expletives directed at Thomas.

“Our institution is supporting genocide, and we turn a blind eye,” said Nyla Broddie, a student at Spelman College, which is part of the AUC. Brodie argued Biden’s Israel policy should be viewed in the broader context of U.S. foreign policy and domestic police violence against Black Americans.

Thomas said he “feels very positive about graduation” and that “not one” Morehouse senior — there are about 500 at the all-male private school — has opted out of participating. “That’s not to say that the sentiments about what’s going on in Gaza don’t resonate with people in our community,” Thomas said.

Thomas met privately with students as did several trustees. The Morehouse alumni association hosted a student town hall, featuring at least one veteran of the Atlanta Student Movement, a Civil Rights-era organization.

But there was a consistent message: Uninviting the president of the United States was not an option. When students raised questions about endowment investments in Israel and U.S. defense contractors, they said they were told the relevant amounts are negligible, a few hundred thousand dollars in mutual funds.

“I think folks are excited” about Biden coming, said Democratic Georgia Sen. Raphael Warnock, the senior pastor at King’s Ebenezer Baptist Church in Atlanta. Warnock said Biden is in “a great position” to talk about [*student debt relief*](https://apnews.com/article/student-loan-cancellation-debt-college-forgiveness-c3ec59d4c1d89e77bc1afc6c8ded1615), increased federal support for HBCUs and other achievements.

HBCUs have not seen crackdowns from law enforcement like those at Columbia University in New York City and the University of California, Los Angeles. However, Morehouse and the AUC have seen peaceful demonstrations, petitions and private meetings among campus stakeholders. Xavier University, a historically Black university in Louisiana, withdrew its commencement [*invitation for U.N. Ambassador Linda Thomas-Greenfield*](https://apnews.com/article/xavier-commencement-un-linda-thomasgreenfield-84742ac8759da4fafea3de30bbc38dba), citing a desire among students “to enjoy a commencement ceremony free of disruptions.”

Whether Morehouse graduates or other students protest Biden or disrupt the ceremony remains to be seen. Student protest leaders say they are unaware of any plans to demonstrate inside during the commencement.

Thomas, Morehouse's president, promised that forms of protest at commencement that “do not disrupt ceremonies” will not result in sanctions for any students.

But he also vowed to end the program early if disruptions grow.

“We will not — on Morehouse’s campus — create a national media moment,” he said, “where our inability to manage these tensions leads to people being taken out of a Morehouse ceremony in zip ties by law enforcement.”