

THE WHITE HOUSE

Office of the Press Secretary

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REMARKS BY THE PRESIDENT
AT MEDALS OF FREEDOM PRESENTATION

The East Room

10:00 A.M. EST

THE PRESIDENT: Thank you very much. I want to begin with a warm welcome to all of our guests here, our honorees and their family members, members of the administration, members of Congress, other distinguished officials.

It is fitting that today this ceremony occurs on the birthday of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. who, 21 years ago, was granted this award by President Carter posthumously, to ensure that his legacy would live on. Until every child has the opportunity to live up to his or her God-given potential, free from want in a world at peace, Dr. King's work and our work is not yet done.

He once said that, "No social advance rolls on the wheels of inevitability." After five years in Washington, I know that is true. (Laughter.) Humanity makes progress through decades of sweat and toil by dedicated individuals who give freely of themselves and who inspire others to do the same -- the kind of heroic men and women we honor today.

All of our honorees have helped America to widen the circle of democracy -- by fighting for human rights, by righting social wrongs, by empowering others to achieve, by preserving our precious environment, by extending peace around the world. Every person here has done so by rising in remarkable ways to America's highest calling, the calling, as the First Lady said, of active citizenship.

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On behalf of a grateful nation, I would like to bestow the Presidential Medal of Freedom on these courageous citizens. Let me say, as I begin, that I am grateful to all of them who are here and those who are not.

First, Arnie Aronson, who, unfortunately, is ill and is represented here by his wife, Annette, his son, Bernie; his granddaughter, Felicia. Arnie Aronson, a glowing symbol of the coalition of conscience linking black and white communities, began his career in civil rights in 1941 when he and A. Philip Randolph secured a landmark executive order banning discrimination on the basis of race. He later co-founded the Leadership Conference on Civil Rights, helping hundreds of disparate groups keep their eyes on the prize and speak with one booming voice.

As the legendary leader, Clarence Mitchell, Jr. said of him, "There would not have been a civil rights movement without the Leadership Conference, and there would not have been a Leadership Conference without Arnie Aronson."

Commander Huey, please read the citation.

(Commander Huey reads citation.)

THE PRESIDENT: I never contradict my wife in public, but I couldn't help thinking when she said we were honoring 15 ordinary American citizens today, I thought: yes, people like Brooke Astor and David Rockefeller. (Laughter.) But I say that to make this point: In some ways, we honor them more, because they certainly had other options. (Laughter.) And that is important to remember.

At the age of 15, about eight decades ago, Brooke Astor wrote a wise poem. In that poem, an elderly man implores a young girl, "Take thy spade and take thine ax. Make the flowers bloom." With her legendary largesse and unequalled grace, she has made more flowers bloom than anyone -- not only at such recognizable landmarks as the New York Public Library and the Metropolitan Museum of Art, but also in forgotten homeless shelters, youth centers and nursing homes. She is not only New York's unofficial First Lady, she has become America's guardian angel.

Commander, read the citation.

(Commander Huey reads the citation.)

THE PRESIDENT: In 1961, a young Air Force psychiatrist in New Orleans saw a six-year-old black girl being heckled by an angry crowd. The girl, Ruby Bridges was her name, did not yell back, but instead knelt down to pray. The doctor, Robert Coles, was greatly

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moved. From that moment on, he dedicated his life to healing racial wounds, aiding children in crisis and inspiring Americans to answer the call of citizen service.

As a Harvard professor and a prolific documentarian of the American spirit, he has been the beacon of social consciousness for more than two generations of Americans, from Robert Kennedy to the freshmen in college today. There is hardly a person I know who has ever read his books who has not been profoundly changed. Hillary and I are personally grateful to him just for those books; but his life has elevated the morality and the spirituality of the United States.

Commander, read the citation.

(Commander Huey reads the citation.)

THE PRESIDENT: Justin Dart literally opened the doors of opportunities to millions of our citizens by securing passage of one of the nation's landmark civil rights laws: The Americans With Disabilities Act. Throughout his career, he has worn many hats, and he's wearing one of them today. (Laughter.)

At the University of Houston, he led bold efforts to promote integration. He went on to become, in his own words, "a full-time soldier in the trenches of justice," turning every state in the nation to elevate disability rights to the mainstream of political discourse.

He once said, "Life is not a game that requires losers." He has given millions a chance to win. He has also been my guide in understanding the needs of disabled Americans. And every time I see him, he reminds me of the power of heart and will. I don't know that I've ever known a braver person.

Commander, read the citation.

(Commander Huey reads the citation.)

THE PRESIDENT: In the spring of 1942, a man fresh out of theology school sat down at the counter of Chicago's Jack Spratt Coffee Shop and ordered a doughnut. Because he was black, he was refused. Because his name was James Farmer, he did not give in. He and the other founders of the Congress of Racial Equality organized the nation's first sit-in and launched an era of nonviolent protests for civil rights.

He went on to help bring down Jim Crow by leading freedom rides, voter drives and marches, enduring repeated beatings and jailings along the way. He has never sought the limelight and until today, I, frankly, think he's never gotten the credit he deserves for the

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contribution he has made to the freedom of African Americans and other minorities and their equals opportunities in America. But today, he can't avoid the limelight, and his long overdue recognition has come to pass.

Read the citation, Commander.

(Commander Huey reads the citation.)

THE PRESIDENT: In 1976, the Girl Scouts of America, one of our country's greatest institutions, was near collapse. Frances Hesselbein, a former volunteer from Johnstown, Pennsylvania, led them back, both in numbers and in spirit. She achieved not only the greatest diversity in the group's long history, but also its greatest cohesion, and in so doing, made a model for us all.

In her current role as the President of the Drucker Foundation for Nonprofit Management, she has shared her remarkable recipe for inclusion and excellence with countless organizations whose bottom line is measured not in dollars, but in changed lives.

Since Mrs. Hesselbein forbids the use of hierarchical words like "up" and "down" when she's around -- (laughter) -- I will call this pioneer for women, volunteerism, diversity and opportunity not up, but forward, to be recognized.

Commander, read the citation.

(Commander Huey reads the citation.)

THE PRESIDENT: In 1942, an ordinary American took an extraordinary stand. Fred Korematsu boldly opposed the forced internment of Japanese Americans during World War II. After being convicted for failing to report for relocation, Mr. Korematsu took his case all the way to the Supreme Court. The high court ruled against him.

But 39 years later, he had his conviction overturned in federal court, empowering tens of thousands of Japanese Americans and giving him what he said he wanted most of all -- the chance to feel like an American once again.

In the long history of our country's constant search for justice, some names of ordinary citizens stand for millions of souls: Plessy. Brown. Parks. To that distinguished list, today we add the name of Fred Korematsu.

Commander, please read the citation.

(Commander Huey reads the citation.)

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THE PRESIDENT: As our mutual friend, Mack McLarty once said, "Receiving advice from Saul Linowitz on international diplomacy is like getting trumpet lessons from the Angel Gabriel." (Laughter.) Saul Linowitz has answered his nation's call many, many times. Over his distinguished career, he has always been willing to extend the hand of peace, freedom and prosperity to our neighbors all over the world.

With his admired style of quiet and conciliatory diplomacy, he has helped President Carter negotiate the Panama Canal Treaties. He made great strides in the peace process in the Middle East. He worked to provide aid to starving Cambodians. He has been our administration's guiding spirit for expanding cooperation throughout our hemisphere. If every world leader had half the vision Saul Linowitz does, we would have about a tenth as many problems as we've got in this whole world today.

He's also led here at home, working to address problems of racism and poverty, always giving generously of his time no matter how busy he is. Saul Linowitz is an American patriot of the highest order.

Commander, read the citation.

(Commander Huey reads the citation.)

THE PRESIDENT: When Wilma Mankiller was 10, she and her family were relocated from Cherokee lands in Oklahoma to San Francisco. But it was in San Francisco during the civil rights era that she found her voice and a belief in the power to make change.

Later, Wilma Mankiller returned to Oklahoma and became Chief of the Chief of the Cherokee nation. During her two terms in office -- and I might add, she won reelection by 82 percent -- (laughter and applause) -- she was not only the guardian of the centuries-old Cherokee heritage, but a revered leader who built a brighter and healthier future for her nation.

When she stepped down as Chief, the Cherokee nation wept. We know today's honor will bring tears of joy to many in both our nations.

Commander, read the citation.

(Commander Huey reads the citation.)

THE PRESIDENT: For Mardy Murie, wilderness is personal. She and her husband, Olaus, spent their honeymoon -- listen to

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this -- on a 550-mile dogsled expedition -- (laughter) -- through the Brooks Mountain Range of Alaska. Fitting for a couple whose love for each other was matched only by their love of nature. And they certainly must have known each other better after the trip was over. (Laughter.)

After her husband died, Mrs. Murie built on their five decades of work together. She became the prime mover in the creation of one of America's great national treasures, the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge, and blazed trails for generations of conservationists.

Today, amidst the fir and spruce of the high Tetons, she shares her wisdom with everyone who passes by, from ordinary hikers to the President and the First Lady, inspiring us all to conserve our pristine lands and preserve her glorious legacy.

Commander, read the citation.

(Commander Huey reads the citation.)

THE PRESIDENT: In 1970, Mario Obledo received a complaint that a public swimming pool in Texas was barring Mexican Americans at the gate. He decided to travel 200 miles to take a swim. (Laughter.) He was turned away and he filed suit. When Mr. Obledo won, even the joy in the courthouse could not match that of Mexican American children whose civil rights had been defended; as, finally, they had a chance to jump into that public pool.

As cofounder of the Mexican American Legal Defense and Education Fund and the National Hispanic Bar Association, as Chairman of the Rainbow Coalition, Mario Obledo has expanded opportunity for Americans of every race and ethnic background. Through the force of law and the power of the vote, he has enhanced the character and condition of America.

Commander, read the citation.

(Commander Huey reads the citation.)

THE PRESIDENT: After he was decorated on the beaches of Normandy and had begun to serve as a law clerk for Justice Felix Frankfurter, Elliott Richardson had a strange request for his distinguished boss. The brilliant, young Renaissance man asked if he could have an uninterrupted hour every morning to read poetry. Alas, he was refused. (Laughter.)

That effort failed, but little else has failed in Elliott Richardson's versatile, indefatigable career. He gave courageous and deeply moral service to our nation as Secretary of Health, Education and Welfare, Secretary of Defense, Ambassador to the United Kingdom,

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Secretary of Commerce -- where he actually painted his own official portrait -- (laughter) -- and of course, as Attorney General, where, on one difficult Saturday night, he saved the nation from a constitutional crisis with his courage and moral clarity.

No public servant is more beloved by those who have served him. No public servant has shown greater respect for the Constitution he has served. And it is my great honor to award him the Medal of Freedom today.

Commander, please read the citation.

(Commander Huey reads the citation.)

THE PRESIDENT: Rockefeller is a name that resonates throughout American history. It means not only private success and wealth, but also an abiding sense of public responsibility. David Rockefeller is the standard-bearer of this family and this tradition for making unprecedented commitments to biomedical research, to sending tens of thousands of retired executives -- all volunteers -- to developing nations in need of advice and skills. In every region of the world, heads of state seek his counsel.

But whether he is addressing the King of Spain or a fellow beetle collector he meets by chance, he treats everyone with exactly the same impeccable courtesy and respect, as I learned when I met him a good while before anyone but my mother thought I could become President. (Laughter.)

David Rockefeller is a gentleman, a statesman, a scholar; and most important, a genuine humanitarian of the likes our nation has rarely seen.

Commander, read the citation.

(Commander Huey reads the citation.)

You know, I hate to break the gravity of the moment, but I have now something else to thank you for. And, David, I've been wondering how we can get this ceremony out into the popular consciousness. And with the mention in the citation of the Trilateral Commission, I know we're going to be on talk radio all over America today, so thank you very much. (Laughter.)

Albert Shanker illuminated our nation's path toward educating our children with devastating honesty, sharp wit and profound wisdom. He was one of the most important teachers of the 20th Century.

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In 1983, when the Nation At Risk Report challenged us to do far more to raise educational standards for all our children, Al Shanker was one of the very first to answer the call. That began for me, a young governor who cared a lot about education, one of the most remarkable working relationships of my entire life. For, Al Shanker was for me and so many others a model, a mentor, a friend, a leader of immense stature who always spoke his mind, no matter how unpopular the thought. We miss him dearly. But we are comforted to know that many others carry on his mission and that his wife, Edie, is here with us today to accept this award which he so richly deserves in his honor.

Commander, read the citation.

(Commander Huey reads the citation.)

THE PRESIDENT: These days, Elmo "Bud" Zumwalt introduces himself as "a former sailor." That's sort of like calling Henry Ford a former car salesman. (Laughter.) In 1970, Bud Zumwalt became the youngest man in our country's history to rise to the rank of Chief of Naval Operations, the Navy's top post. There, he earned billing as the Navy's most popular leader since World War II for his bold efforts to modernize Navy life. He is a genuine patriot with an astonishing life story that includes a remarkable wife, whom me met a year or two ago in China.

But more than most Americans who have served our country with distinction, Admiral Zumwalt paid a deeply personal price for his leadership of the Navy during the Vietnam War. For, his son, a junior officer in the war, died of a cancer linked to his exposure to Agent Orange in Vietnam. The remarkable thing was Admiral Zumwalt's response. He dedicated himself to fighting for those with war-related ailments. He established the first national marrow donor program to help cancer patients in need. He never stopped fighting for the interests, the rights and the dignity of those soldiers and sailors and airmen and marines and their families.

Hillary and I have been deeply blessed to know Bud Zumwalt and his wife, Mouza and their family very well. Yes, he is a former sailor. He is also one of the greatest models of integrity and leadership in genuine humanity our nation has ever produced.

Commander, please read the citation.

THE PRESIDENT: Do you think I was going to change my mind?
(Laughter.) Thank you. (Applause.)

(Commander Huey reads the citation.)

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THE PRESIDENT: Before we move to the State Dining Room for the reception and honor of our awardees, I'd like to close with a brief note about the future.

Hillary and I and the Vice President -- indeed, our entire administration -- are going to be working hard in the coming months to help the American people imagine what the 21st Century can bring. As of today, that new century is just a little more than 700 days away which, as you reflect on the remarkable lives we have celebrated today, is not a lot of time.

But I went back and checked. It's about the same amount of time that, from 1961 to 1963, an active citizen named King helped James Meredith go to college, stood up to Bull Connor, wrote a letter from a jail in Birmingham, helped to organize the March on Washington and gave a little speech. His main line was "I Have A Dream." Not a bad 700 days' work.

We must resolve to use our time just as wisely. As we have learned from today from the remarkable lives of the people we celebrate, some of whom span nearly this entire century, even a long, long life doesn't take long to live, and passes in the flash of an eye. They have shown us that if we live it well, we can leave this earth better for our children.

Thank you and God bless you. (Applause.)

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10:46 A.M. EST