

Administration of Barack Obama, 2011

Remarks on Presenting the Presidential Medals of Freedom
February 15, 2011

Thank you so much. Everyone please be seated, and welcome to the White House. Some of you have been here before. *[Laughter]*

This is one of the things that I most look forward to every year. It's a chance to meet with, and more importantly, honor, some of the most extraordinary people in America and around the world.

President Kennedy once said, during a tribute to the poet Robert Frost, that a nation reveals itself not only by the men and women it produces, but by the men and women that it honors, the people that it remembers. I heartily agree. When you look at the men and women who are here today, it says something about who we are as a people.

When we award this medal to a Congressman John Lewis, it says that we aspire to be a more just, more equal, more perfect Union. When we award it to a Jasper Johns, it says we value the original and the imaginative. When we award it to a Warren Buffett, it says we'd all like to be so humble and wise and maybe make a little money along the way. *[Laughter]* And when we award it to former President George H.W. Bush, it says we celebrate an extraordinary life of service and of sacrifice.

This year's Medal of Freedom recipients reveal the best of who we are and who we aspire to be. In 1970, John Adams and a handful of unpaid attorneys and law students salvaged some old desks and set up an environmental law firm in New York City. For 36 years, John sat at the same desk. But the group he cofounded, the Natural Resources Defense Council, grew well beyond it. "Our first obligation is to the environment," John once said. "If people want to protect the environment, we'll support their efforts. If not, we'll play hardball."

With more than 1 million members, NRDC has won landmark cases and helped pass landmark laws to clean up our air and water, protect our forests and wildlife, and keep our climate safe. So Rolling Stone put it best: "If the planet has a lawyer, it's John Adams." *[Laughter]*

As a girl, Marguerite Ann Johnson endured trauma and abuse that actually led her to stop speaking. But as a performer, and ultimately a writer, a poet, Maya Angelou found her voice. It's a voice that's spoken to millions, including my mother, which is why my sister is named Maya. *[Laughter]*

By holding on, even amid cruelty and loss, and then expanding to a sense of compassion, an ability to love, by holding on to her humanity, she has inspired countless others who have known injustice and misfortune in their own lives. I won't try to say it better than Maya Angelou herself, who wrote that:

History, despite its wrenching pain,
Cannot be unlived, and if faced with courage,
Need not be lived again.
Lift up your eyes upon
The day breaking for you.
Give birth again

To the dream.

In 1942, an 11-year-old boy from Omaha, Nebraska, invested his entire fortune in six shares of City Services Preferred at \$38 per share. The stock soon dropped sharply, devastating his holdings. [Laughter] But true to form, the boy did not panic. He held those shares until the stock rebounded, earning himself a small profit. Things got a little bit better after that.

[Laughter]

Today, we know Warren Buffett not only as one of the world's richest men, but also one of the most admired and respected. Unmoved by financial fads, he has doggedly sought out value, put his weight behind companies with promise and demonstrated that integrity isn't just a good trait, it is good for business. And yet for all the money he's earned, you don't see Warren Buffett wearing fancy suits or driving fancy cars. Instead, you see him devoting the vast majority of his wealth to those around the world who are suffering or sick or in need of help. And he uses his stature as a leader to press others of great means to do the same. A philanthropist is a lover of humanity, and there's no word that fits Warren better. I should point out he's so thrifty I had to give him a White House tie—[laughter]—the last time he came here to visit. His was looking a little shredded. [Laughter] So then when Bill Gates came, he wanted one too. [Laughter]

It has been noted that Jasper Johns's work, playing off familiar images, have transfixed people around the world. Historians will tell you that he helped usher in the artistic movements that would define the latter half of the 20th century. Many would say he is one of the greatest artists of our time. And yet of his own efforts he has simply said, "I'm just trying to find a way to make pictures"—just trying to find a way to make pictures.

Like great artists before him, Jasper Johns pushed the boundaries of what art could be and challenged others to test their own assumptions. He didn't do it for fame, he didn't do it for success, although he earned both. As he said, "I assumed that everything would lead to complete failure, but I decided that it didn't matter—that would be my life." [Laughter] We are richer as a society because it was. And Jasper, you've turned out fine. [Laughter]

When you are among the youngest of nine children, you develop a strong sense of empathy. When those children are the Kennedys, you also develop a strong set of diplomatic skills just to be heard. Both traits helped Jean Kennedy Smith follow her siblings into public service. When her brother, President Kennedy, visited Ireland in 1963, he promised he'd be back in the springtime. Thirty years later, it was left to Jean to return for him. As President Clinton's Ambassador to Ireland, Jean was as vital as she was unconventional, helping brave men and women find the courage to see past the scars of violence and mistrust and come together to forge a lasting peace.

Touched by experiences in her own life, Jean also founded the VSA program, helping people with disabilities discover the joys of learning through the arts, changing the lives of those it has served. And today, her mission has spread to more than 50 countries and touched millions of lives, ensuring that the family business remains alive and well.

By the time she was 21, Gerda Klein had spent 6 years living under Nazi rule, three of them in concentration camps. Her parents and brother had been taken away. Her best friend had died in her arms during a 350-mile death march. And she weighed only 68 pounds when she was found by American forces in an abandoned bicycle factory. But Gerda survived. She married the soldier who rescued her. And ever since—as an author, a historian, and a crusader

for tolerance—she has taught the world that it is often in our most hopeless moments that we discover the extent of our strength and the depth of our love.

"I pray you never stand at any crossroads in your own lives," she says, "but if you do, if the darkness seems so total, if you think there is no way out, remember, never ever give up."

That's a quote that would be familiar to our next honoree. There's a quote inscribed over a doorway in Nashville, where students first refused to leave lunch counters 51 years ago this February. And the quote said, "If not us, then who? If not now, then when?" It's a question John Lewis has been asking his entire life. It's what led him back to the Edmund Pettus Bridge in Selma after he had already been beaten within an inch of his life days before. It's why, time and again, he faced down death so that all of us could share equally in the joys of life. It's why all these years later, he is known as the conscience of the United States Congress, still speaking his mind on issues of justice and equality. And generations from now, when parents teach their children what is meant by courage, the story of John Lewis will come to mind, an American who knew that change could not wait for some other person or some other time; whose life is a lesson in the fierce urgency of now.

An optometrist from New York, Tom Little could have pursued a lucrative career. Instead, he guided—he was guided by his faith, and he set out to heal the poorest of the poor in Afghanistan. For 30 years, amid invasion and civil war, the terror of the Taliban, the spread of insurgency, he and his wife Libby helped bring Afghans, literally, the miracle of sight. Last summer, Tom and his team of doctors and nurses were ambushed and senselessly murdered. Today we remember and honor Dr. Tom Little, a humanitarian in the truest sense of the word; a man who not only dedicated his life to others, but who lived that lesson of Scripture: "Greater love hath no man than this, that a man lay down his life for his friends."

Yo-Yo Ma has been a concert cellist since the age of 5. Despite being a late bloomer—[laughter]—he went on to record over 75 albums and win 16 Grammys—which means I'm only 14 behind him. [Laughter] While Yo-Yo could have just settled for being the world's greatest cellist, he's said that even greater than his passion for music is his passion for people. And I can testify to this. There are few people you'll meet with just the exuberance and joy that Yo-Yo possesses. And so he's spent much of his life traveling the world, training and mentoring thousands of students, from Lebanon and Korea to the Iraqi National Symphony Orchestra. A member of my Committee on the Arts and the Humanities, he has been named a Messenger of Peace by the United Nations, and we understand why. In his words, "When we enlarge our view of the world, we deepen our understanding of our own lives."

For Sylvia Mendez, a lifelong quest for equality began when she was just 8 years old. Outraged that their daughter had to attend a segregated school, Sylvia's parents linked arms with other Latino families to fight injustice in a California Federal court, a case that would pave the way for *Brown v. Board of Education*. The next year, when a classmate taunted Sylvia saying that Mexicans didn't belong there, she went home in tears, begging to leave the school. Her mother wouldn't have it. She told Sylvia, "Don't you realize that's why we went to court? You are just as good as he is." And Sylvia took those words to heart. And ever since, she has made it her mission to spread a message of tolerance and opportunity to children of all backgrounds and all walks of life.

Growing up in communist East Germany, Angela Merkel dreamed of freedom. And when the Wall finally crumbled and Germany was reunited, she broke barriers of her own, becoming the first East German, and the first woman, to become chancellor of Germany.

To America, Chancellor Merkel and the country she leads are among our closest allies. To me, she is a trusted global partner and a friend. To people around the world, the story of Angela Merkel is an inspiration. "Everything is possible," she's said, something the world has seen again in recent weeks. "Freedom does not come about of itself. It must be struggled for, and then defended anew, every day of our lives."

Chancellor Merkel isn't here today. She'll be visiting me for a visit—an official visit soon, and so I look forward to presenting her the award when she comes.

Stan Musial, his brilliance could come in blinding bursts; hitting five home runs in a single day's doubleheader; leading the league in singles, doubles, triples, and RBIs over a single season; three World Series; first-ballot Hall of Famer; worthy of one of the greatest nicknames in sports, Stan the Man. *[Laughter]* My grandfather was Stan, by the way, so I used to call him "The Man" too, Stan. *[Laughter]*

Stan Musial made that brilliance burn for two decades. Stan matched his hustle with humility. He retired with 17 records, even as he missed a season in his prime to serve his country in the Navy. He was the first player to make—get this—\$100,000. *[Laughter]* Even more shocking, he asked for a pay cut when he didn't perform up to his own expectations. You can imagine that happening today. *[Laughter]* Stan remains, to this day, an icon, untarnished; a beloved pillar of the community; a gentleman you'd want your kids to emulate. "I hope I've given [baseball] nearly as much as I've gotten from it," Stan wrote in his memoirs, knocking it out of the park one more time.

When Bill Russell was in junior high, he was cut from his basketball team. *[Laughter]* He got better after that. *[Laughter]* He led the University of San Francisco to two championships. In 13 seasons with the Boston Celtics, he won 11 championships, a record unmatched in any sport. Won two while also serving as the team's coach, and so happens, he also was the first African American ever to hold such a position as a coach in a Major League sports team of any sort. More than any athlete of his era, Bill Russell came to define the word winner.

And yet whenever someone looks up at all 6'9" of Bill Russell—I just did—*[laughter]*—I always feel small next to him—and asks, "Are you a basketball player?"—surprisingly, he gets this more than you think, this question—*[laughter]*—he says, "No." He says, "That's what I do, that's not what I am. I'm not a basketball player. I am a man who plays basketball."

Bill Russell, the man, is someone who stood up for the rights and dignity of all men. He marched with King; he stood by Ali. When a restaurant refused to serve the black Celtics, he refused to play in the scheduled game. He endured insults and vandalism, but he kept on focusing on making the teammates who he loved better players, and made possible the success of so many who would follow. And I hope that one day, in the streets of Boston, children will look up at a statue built not only to Bill Russell the player, but Bill Russell the man.

The Bronx-born son of Irish immigrants, John Sweeney was shaped by three things. His family—his mother was a maid, his father was a bus driver—instilled in him that fundamentally American idea that through hard work, we can make of our lives what we will. The church taught him our obligations to ourselves and one another. And as a child, he saw that by banding together in a union, we can accomplish great things that we can't accomplish alone. John devoted his career to the labor movement, adding working folks to its ranks and fighting for fair working conditions and fair wages. As the head of the AFL-CIO, he was responsible for dozens of unions with millions of working families. Family, faith, fidelity to the common good, these

are the values that make John Sweeney who he is, values at the heart of a labor movement that has helped build the world's greatest middle class.

And finally, we recognize our last recipient, not simply for the years he spent as our 41st President. We honor George Herbert Walker Bush for service to America that spanned nearly 70 years. From a decorated Navy pilot who nearly gave his life in World War II to U.S. Ambassador to the United Nations, from CIA Director to U.S. Envoy to China to the Vice Presidency, his life is a testament that public service is a noble calling.

As President, he expanded America's promise to new immigrants and people with disabilities. He reduced nuclear weapons. He built a broad international coalition to expel a dictator from Kuwait. When democratic revolutions swept across Eastern Europe, it was the steady diplomatic hand of President Bush that made possible an achievement once thought impossible, ending the cold war without firing a shot.

I would add that, like the remarkable Barbara Bush, his humility and his decency reflects the very best of the American spirit. Those of you who know him, this is a gentleman, inspiring citizens to become points of light in service to others, teaming up with a one-time political opponent to champion relief for the victims of the Asian tsunami, the Hurricane Katrina, and then, just to cap it off, well into eighties, he decides to jump out of airplanes—[laughter]—because, as he explains, "it feels good."

These are the recipients of the 2010 Medal of Freedom. So now it is my great pleasure and my great honor to present them with their medals.

[At this point, Lt. Cmdr. John F. McCarthy, USCG, Coast Guard Aide to the President, read the citations, and the President presented the medals.]

I know that people try to observe decorum when they're here in the White House—[laughter]—but I'd welcome everybody to stand and acknowledge these extraordinary men and women of the 2011 [2010]* Medal of Freedom.

All right, everybody. Now you can see why I love this day, and I hope everyone has a wonderful time during the reception. Thank you so much for your attendance. And again, to our honorees, thanks for setting such an extraordinary example for all of us. Thank you very much.

NOTE: The President spoke at 1:40 p.m. in the East Room at the White House. In his remarks, he referred to his sister Maya Soetoro-Ng; Kurt Klein, husband of Gerda W. Klein; Elizabeth Little, wife of Tom Little; former heavyweight boxing champion Muhammad Ali; and former First Lady Barbara Bush. The transcript released by the Office of the Press Secretary also included the remarks of Lt. Cmdr. John F. McCarthy, USCG, Coast Guard Aide to the President.

Categories: Addresses and Remarks : Presidential Medal of Freedom, presentation.

Locations: Washington, DC.

Names: Adams, John H.; Ali, Muhammad; Angelou, Maya; Buffett, Warren E.; Bush, Barbara; Bush, George H.W.; Clinton, William J.; Gates, William H., III; Johns, Jasper, Jr.; Johnson,

* White House correction.

Marguerite A.; Klein, Gerda W.; Klein, Kurt; Lewis, John R.; Little, Elizabeth; Little, Tom; Ma, Yo-Yo; Mendez, Sylvia; Merkel, Angela; Musial, Stanley F.; Russell, William F.; Smith, Jean A. Kennedy; Soetoro-Ng, Maya; Sweeney, John J.

Subjects: Business and industry : Labor issues :: AFL-CIO; Business and industry : Labor issues :: Organized labor; Civil rights : Civil rights movement; Decorations, medals and awards : Presidential Medal of Freedom; Germany : Chancellor; Germany : Relations with U.S.; Sports : Baseball; Sports : Basketball; Voluntarism.

DCPD Number: DCPD201100089.