

Administration of Barack Obama, 2011

Remarks on Presenting the National Medal of the Arts and the National Humanities Medal

March 2, 2011

The President. Thank you very much, everyone. Please, have a seat. Thank you. Well, hello, everybody. It is wonderful to have all of you here.

I want to make mention of some folks in particular that have helped us to celebrate the arts and the humanities for many years. First of all, if I'm not mistaken, our Democratic leader in the House of Representatives, Nancy Pelosi, a great champion of the arts, is here. There she is. Thank you, Nancy.

The Chairman of the National Endowment for the Arts, Rocco Landesman, is here. Where's Rocco? There he is. The Chairman of the National Endowment for the Humanities, Jim Leach, is here. The two most powerful people in the White House, Jill Biden and Michelle Obama, are here. [*Laughter*]

And two recipients who were unable to be here, but who we love, I want to make sure to acknowledge: Meryl Streep and Harper Lee could not be here today, but they will be receiving their awards as well. So please give them a round of applause.

I was just told by my wife that I went off program because originally we were supposed to get everybody seated and I was supposed to then come in and make my formal remarks. And I bulled my way through to go ahead and see the honorees before they came out here to sit down, because these are extraordinary people. One of the great joys of being President is getting a chance to pay tribute to the artists and authors, the poets and performers, who have touched our hearts and opened our minds, or, in the case of Quincy Jones and James Taylor, set the mood. [*Laughter*]

One of the people that we honor today, Joyce Carol Oates, has said, "Ours is the nation, so rare in human history, of self-determination; a theoretical experiment in newness, exploration, discovery." That's what we do.

And for more than two centuries, this experiment has been conducted by revolutionaries and pioneers, by immigrants who braved hardship and inventors who tested new ideas, soldiers who fought for our freedom and ordinary citizens who marched for their rights.

But we are here today because these men and women were not alone in these struggles. With them were the stories that sparked their imaginations, the poetry and the music that inspired their causes, the works of art and literature that spoke to their condition and affirmed their desire for something more.

And I speak personally here because there are people here whose books or poetry or works of history shaped me. I've got these thumb-worn editions of these works of art and these old records where they were still vinyl, Sonny—[*laughter*—]before they went digital, that helped inspire me or get me through a tough day or take risks that I might not otherwise have taken. And I think what's true for me is true for everyone here and true for our country.

The fact is that works of art, literature, works of history, they speak to our condition and they affirm our desire for something more and something better.

It was the writings of Thomas Paine that General Washington ordered his men to read before crossing the Delaware. It was spirituals sung by slaves around a campfire that helped to keep hope alive. We can think of the protest songs that tell the story of the civil rights movement, the photographs from the Great Depression that showed how folks were suffering, but also how they were striving.

Time and again, the tools of change and of progress, of revolution, of ferment, they're not just pickaxes and hammers and screens and software, but they've also been brushes and pens and cameras and guitars.

And the arts and the humanities help us through the hard times and they remind us of what make the good times worthwhile. After all, the goal doesn't always have to be so lofty. Sometimes, we just need a break, a chance to laugh or escape from the moment.

So all of the individuals that we honor today are part of this tradition. We can point to their performances, on stage or on film, that we carry with us forever because we've been so moved. We can think of the novels that have chronicled the American experience, from the streets of Newark to the courts of Alabama. How many young people have come to see the senseless cruelty of racism, and the importance of standing up for what's right, through the eyes of a girl named Scout? How many young people have learned to think by reading the exploits of Portnoy and his complaints? *[Laughter]*

We also remember the art that challenged our assumptions, the scholarship that brought us closer to the events of our history, the poetry that we loved, or at least the poetry that we might recite to a girlfriend to seem deep. *[Laughter]* Of course, we still hum the great songs by the musicians in this room; songs that in many cases have been the soundtrack of our lives over decades.

And that's why I'm so proud to have this opportunity to celebrate the contributions that all of you have made to our country. It's why we have to remember that our strength as a people runs deeper than our military might, it runs deeper than our GDP; it's also about our values and our ideals that each generation is called to uphold and that each artist helps us better understand.

And it's also about the capacity of the arts and the humanities to connect us to one another. In a nation as big as ours, as diverse as ours, as full as debate and consternation as it sometimes is, what the people we honor here today remind us of is that kernel of ourselves that connects to everyone else and allows us to get out of ourselves, to see through somebody else's eyes, to step in their shoes. And what more vital ingredient is there for our democracy than that?

In 1962, in the last months of his life, the poet Robert Frost was dispatched by President Kennedy to visit the Soviet Union. And it was a gesture of good will. Frost traveled and gave readings, filling venues all across Russia. What he really wanted to do, though, was have a chance to talk to Khrushchev. Frost was a poet, but he was also a pretty tough guy.

It wasn't until the end of his trip that the meeting was arranged. And when they met, even though Frost was frail and sick, he decided he had to speak his mind to the Soviet leader. And Frost stood up and he said, "A great nation makes great poetry." And then he told Khrushchev that he should reunite East and West Berlin.

A great nation should make great poetry. Like so many artists and musicians and writers and poets before him, and so many that came after him, Robert Frost wasn't afraid to say his

piece or speak truth to power. He wasn't afraid to tell what was on his mind. He wasn't held back by convention or what was considered normal or acceptable.

And that is an incredible power, an incredible resource. And we're seeing that power all across the world today. That's what challenges us. That's what pushes us to be better, to be more faithful to the sense of humanity that so often can be lost in the experiences of our daily lives.

Pissarro once said, "Blessed are they who see beautiful things in humble places." That is the blessing of those that we honor here today, and we are blessed that they are able to share what they see and what they hear.

So now it is my privilege to present these medals to our recipients in both the arts and the humanities.

[At this point, Maj. Barrett M. Bernard, USA, Army Aide to the President, read the citations, and the President presented the medals.]

The President. I think it is entirely appropriate for all of us to stand and give a warm congratulations to the recipients of these awards. Not the recipients, you don't have to stand.

Well, congratulations to all the recipients. We're going to take some quick pictures with them, and then usually we have a party around here. *[Laughter]* Our Marine Band is very good and the food is pretty good around here too. So enjoy yourselves and thanks again for helping us to celebrate these extraordinary men and women of letters and the arts. Thank you.

NOTE: The President spoke at 1:54 p.m. in the East Room at the White House. In his remarks, he referred to jazz saxophonist and National Medal of Arts recipient Theodore W. "Sonny" Rollins.

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