

Administration of Barack Obama, 2015

Remarks on Presenting the Presidential Medal of Freedom

November 24, 2015

The President. Hello, everybody! Please. Thank you. Everybody, please have a seat. Everybody, have a seat. Well, welcome to the White House, everybody.

Audience member. Thank you.

Audience member. Thank you, Mr. President.

The President. A bunch of people were saying I was pretty busy today, which is true. [Laughter] But this is a fun kind of busy right here. Today we celebrate some extraordinary people—innovators, artists, and leaders—who contribute to America's strength as a nation, and we offer them our highest civilian honor, the Presidential Medal of Freedom.

Let me tell you just a little bit about them, although I suspect people here already know their stories. Growing up in West Virginia, Katherine Johnson counted everything. She counted steps. She counted dishes. She counted the distance to the church. By 10 years old, she was in high school. By 18, she had graduated from college with degrees in math and French. As an African American woman, job options were limited, but she was eventually hired as one of several female mathematicians for the agency that would become NASA.

Katherine calculated the flight path for America's first mission in space, the path that put—and the path that put Neil Armstrong on the moon. She was even asked to double-check the computer's math—[laughter]—on John Glenn's orbit around the Earth. So if you think your job is pressure-packed—[laughter]—hers meant that forgetting to carry the one might send somebody floating off into the solar system. [Laughter] In her 33 years at NASA, Katherine was a pioneer who broke the barriers of race and gender, showing generations of young people that everyone can excel in math and science and reach for the stars.

In the early 1960s, a lawyer named Bill Ruckelshaus drove through Indiana in a truck, sample—taking samples from streams "choked with dead fish." He called it "a very good time." [Laughter] I think we have different definitions of "a very good time." But it was all part of protecting Americans from big polluters. And in 1970, when Richard Nixon created the Environmental Protection Agency, he made Bill, a fellow Republican, its first director. Under Bill's leadership, the EPA developed new clean air standards, banned the harmful pesticide DDT. Most importantly, Bill set a powerful precedent that protecting our environment is something we must come together and do as a country.

He became known as "Mr. Clean"—[laughter]—and lived up to that nickname when he resigned from the Nixon administration rather than derail the Watergate investigation. He's never truly retired. In recent years he's led the fight to protect Puget Sounds, and he's urged his fellow Republicans to join him in combating climate change. So he spent his life putting country before party or politics. He reminds us how noble public service can be. And our air and water is cleaner and our lives are brighter because of him.

Back in 1966, plans were laid for a highway straight through some of Baltimore's most diverse neighborhoods. The new road seemed like a go. It was about to happen, that is, until it ran into a young social worker. [Laughter] And let's just say, you don't want to get on the wrong side of Barbara Mikulski. [Laughter] She stopped that highway and jumpstarted one of the

finest public service careers we've ever seen. And for decades, Barbara has been a lion—lioness—on Capitol Hill, fighting for working families, fighting for high-tech, high-paying jobs, fighting for the prospects of America's women and girls.

I couldn't have been prouder to have her by my side as I signed into law the Lilly Ledbetter Fair Pay Act, first law that I signed. And Barbara's legacy reflects her roots: a mom who offered grocery store credit to steelworkers on strike, a dad who greeted every customer with a friendly "Can I help you?" We are all lucky that's a question Barbara's been asking and answering longer than any female lawmaker in our history.

There are people in our country's history who don't look left or right, they just look straight ahead. And Shirley Chisholm was one of those people. Driven by a profound commitment to justice, she became the first African American Congresswoman, the first African American woman from a major political party to run for President. When Shirley was assigned to the House Agricultural Committee—despite the fact that her district was from New York City—[laughter]—she said, "Apparently, all they know here in Washington about Brooklyn is that a tree grew there." [Laughter] But she made the most of her new role, helping to create the supplemental nutrition program that feeds poor mothers and their children. Shirley Chisholm's example transcends her life. And when asked how she'd like to be remembered, she had an answer: "I'd like them to say that Shirley Chisholm has—had guts." And I'm proud to say it: Shirley Chisholm had guts.

"At its best," Lee Hamilton once said, "representative democracy gives us a system where all of us have a voice in the process and a stake in the product." In his 34 years in Congress, Lee Hamilton was a faithful servant of—to that ideal, representing his district, his beloved Indiana, and his country with integrity and honor. As head of the House Foreign Affairs and Intelligence Committees, he helped guide us through the cold war and into a new era of American leadership, a man widely admired on both sides of the aisle for his honesty, his wisdom, and consistent commitment to bipartisanship. From serving as Vice Chair of the 9/11 Commission to making Congress more effective, Lee remains a tireless public servant and a trusted advisor and friend to many, and I am proud to count myself among them.

We also celebrate those who have stirred our souls and lifted our spirits as icons of the stage, screen and song. Born in Brooklyn to a middle class Jewish family—I didn't know you were Jewish, Barbra—[laughter]—Barbra Streisand attended her first Broadway show at age 14 and remembers thinking, "I could go up on that stage and play any role without any trouble at all." That's what's called chutzpah. [Laughter] And it helps when you've got amazing talent, all of which made her a global sensation, one whose voice has been described as "liquid diamonds," and whose fans have considered bronzing her used coffee cups. [Laughter] She has sold more albums in America than any woman in history. She has collected just about every honor and award that there is. I couldn't believe she hadn't gotten this one. [Laughter] Off the stage, she has been a passionate advocate for issues like heart disease and women's equality. I'm getting all *verklempt* just thinking about it. [Laughter]

In an interview, violinist Itzhak Perlman was once asked what sound he loves, and his eyes lit up, and he replied, "The sound of onions sizzling in a pan." [Laughter] This is a man of large appetites who knows how to live. He also happens to be a pretty good musician and persevered through childhood polio to become not only a virtuoso, but also a powerful advocate for people with disabilities. He has played with every major orchestra in the world, conducted many of them, taught generations of young musicians. He has won Grammys. He has won Emmys. He's performed with all the greats: Leonard Bernstein. Yo-Yo Ma. Telly from "Sesame Street."

[*Laughter*] But what truly sets him apart and what makes him perhaps the most beloved violinist of our time is that he approaches music the way he approaches everything in life, with passion and with joy. He lays bare the soul of a piece, making us feel each note and giving us a glimpse of something bigger than ourselves. And by doing so, he makes the world a little more beautiful.

I'm proud to call the next honoree a friend as well. The truth is, a lot of people say that about James Taylor. That's what happens when you spend four decades telling people, "Just call out my name, and I'll come running." [*Laughter*] But that's the thing about James: You always feels like he's singing only to you. As a fan of his once said, James can "turn an arena into a living room." It's why he became one of the driving forces of the singer-songwriter movement. And his honesty and candor about overcoming substance abuse has inspired not only his music, but people all around the world. So come fire or rain, come Carolina, Mexico, or a country road—[*laughter*—James Taylor is there to comfort us, to help us look within and to urge us all to shower the people we love with love. [*Laughter*]

On a Miami night in 1975, a young woman named Gloria walked into a wedding reception and saw a handsome young man named Emilio leading his band. He was playing "Do the Hustle" on an accordion. [*Laughter*] I'm quoting her now: She said she found this "sexy and brave." [*Laughter*] I mean, the brave part I understand. [*Laughter*] But it turns out, he had a few other things up his sleeve. He brought her up to sing a few songs that night, invited her to join his band. A few months later, Emilio asked Gloria for a birthday kiss. It was not her birthday—it wasn't his birthday, but he got the kiss anyway. And Emilio and Gloria Estefan have been partners—on and off stage—ever since.

Some worried they were "too American for Latins and too Latin for Americans." Turns out, everybody just wanted to dance and do the conga. And together, their fusion sound has sold more than 100 million records. And as proud Cuban Americans, they've promoted their cultural heritage and inspired fans all over the world.

"An awful lot of people have gone . . . to musicals to forget their troubles . . ."—just like they were dancing to Estefans' music. Stephen Sondheim, I think, is somebody who is not interested in that. As a composer and a lyricist and a genre unto himself, Sondheim challenges his audiences. His greatest hits aren't tunes you can hum; they're reflections on roads we didn't take and wishes gone wrong, relationships so frayed and fractured there's nothing left to do but "Send in the Clowns." [*Laughter*] Yet Stephen's music is so beautiful, his lyrics so precise, that even as he exposes the imperfections of everyday life, he transcends them. We transcend them. Put simply, Stephen reinvented the American musical, has loomed large over more than six decades in the theater. And with revivals from Broadway to the big screen, he is still here, pulling us up short and giving us support for "being alive."

Here's how Steven Spielberg once explained his creative process: "Once a month, the sky falls on my head. I come to, and I see another movie I want to make." [*Laughter*] This sounds painful for Steven, but it has worked out pretty well for the rest of us. In his career, Steven has introduced us to extraterrestrials, rogue archeologists, killer sharks. He's taken us to Neverland, Jurassic Park, but also the beaches of Normandy and Nazi concentration camps. Despite redefining the world—word "prolific," a Spielberg movie is still a Spielberg movie.

[*At this point, a phone rang.*]

Somebody is calling to see if they can book him for a deal right now. [*Laughter*] They want to make pitch: "So there's this really good-looking President and"—[*laughter*].

A Spielberg movie, marked by boundless imagination, worlds rendered in extraordinary detail, characters whose struggle to seize control of their destinies—all of that reminds us so powerfully of our own lives. And Steven's films are marked most importantly by a faith in our common humanity, the same faith in humanity that led him to create the Shoah Foundation and lend a voice to survivors of genocide around the world. His stories have shaped America's story, and his values have shaped our world.

So we celebrate artists, public servants, and two legends from America's pastime. What can be said about Lawrence "Yogi" Berra that he couldn't say better himself? *[Laughter]* The son of an Italian bricklayer, they called him "Yogi" because he sat like one while waiting to bat. And he was born to play baseball. But he loved his country, and at 18, he left St. Louis for the Navy and ultimately found himself on Omaha Beach. After he returned, Yogi embarked on a career that would make him one of the greatest catchers of all time. With the Yankees, he played in 14 World Series in 18 years, won 10 World Series rings, had 3 MVP awards. He had, as one biographer put it, "the winningest career in the history of American sports." Nobody has won more than this guy. And he coached the game with as much heart as he played it. He lived his life with pride and humility and an original, open mind. One thing we know for sure, "If you can't imitate him, don't copy him." *[Laughter]* It took everybody a while there. *[Laughter]*

We don't have time to list all of Willie Mays's statistics: 660 home runs, .302 lifetime batting average. The list goes on and on. I won't describe that miracle grab at the Polo Grounds either, because Willie says that wasn't even his best catch. *[Laughter]* I will say this: We have never seen an all-around, five-tool player quite like Willie before, and we haven't seen one since. He could throw and he could field, hit for contact and for power. And, of course, he was so fast, he could barely keep a hat on his head. *[Laughter]* On top of that, Willie also served our country, and his quiet example while excelling on one of America's biggest stages helped carry forward the banner of civil rights. A few years ago, Willie rode with me on Air Force One. I told him then what I'll tell all of you now: It's because of giants like Willie that someone like me could even think about running for President.

And finally, we celebrate those who have challenged us to live up to our values. Billy Frank, Jr., liked to say: "I wasn't a policy guy. I was a getting-arrested guy." *[Laughter]* And that's true. Billy was arrested more than 50 times in his fight to protect tribal fishing rights and save the salmon that had fed his family for generations. He was spat on, shot at, chased, and clubbed and cast as an outlaw. But Billy kept fighting. Because he knew he was right. And in 1974, a Federal judge agreed, honoring the promises made to Northwest tribes more than a century before. Billy went on to become a national voice for Indian Country and a warrior for the natural world. "I don't believe in magic," Billy once said. "I believe in the Sun and the stars, the water, the hawks flying, the rivers running, the wind talking." They tell us how healthy we are, he said, "because we and they are the same."

Twenty-three years ago, Bonnie Carroll's world was turned upside down. Her husband, Tom, a brigadier general in the Army, was killed in a plane crash, along with seven other soldiers. Heartbroken, Bonnie began healing the only way that she knew how: by helping others. She founded the Tragedy Assistance Program for Survivors, creating a national community to support the families of our fallen servicemembers. And each year, TAPS holds seminars and workshops for military families across the country. Through their Good Grief camps, they bring together children of our fallen to learn how to cope with loss, to honor the legacy of their heroes and to try and have some fun as well. As one Gold Star child who lost her father in Iraq said, "[Because of TAPS], I know someone is by my side."

On a Saturday night in March of 1942, Minoru Yasui left his law office to walk around Portland, Oregon. It was a seemingly ordinary act that defied the discriminatory military curfew imposed on Japanese Americans during World War II. Min took his case to the Supreme Court and lost, a decision he fought for the rest of his life. Yet, despite what Japanese Americans endured—suspicion, hostility, forced removal, internment—Min never stopped believing in the promise of his country. He never stopped fighting for equality and justice for all. "We believe in the greatness and in the great ideals of this country," he once said. "We think that there is a future for all humanity in the United States of America." Today, Min's legacy has never been more important. It is a call to our national conscience, a reminder of our enduring obligation to be "the land of the free and the home of the brave," an America worthy of his sacrifice.

So, ladies and gentlemen, these are the recipients of the 2015 Presidential Medal of Freedom. Let's give them a big round of applause.

And now—have a seat. [*Laughter*] We're not done. They've got to get some hardware here. [*Laughter*] To my military aide, let's read the citations.

[*At this point, Maj. Wesley N. Spurlock III, USAF, Air Force Aide to the President, read the citations, and the President presented the medals, assisted by Cmdr. Timothy J. Myers, USN, Navy Aide to the President.*]

The President. Ladies and gentlemen, give them a big round of applause, the 2015 Presidential Medal of Freedom winners. This is an extraordinary group.

Audience members. Yes!

The President. Even by the standards of Medal of Freedom recipients, this is a class act.

We are just reminded when we see these individuals here on the stage what an incredible tapestry this country is. And what a great blessing to be in a nation where individuals as diverse, from as wildly different backgrounds, can help to shape our dreams, how we live together, help define justice and freedom and love. They represent what's best in us, and we are very, very proud to be able to celebrate them here today.

My understanding is also, there's pretty good food in the White House, so please enjoy the reception. And congratulations to all the recipients. Thank you very much, everybody.

NOTE: The President spoke at 5:19 p.m. in the East Room at the White House. In his remarks, he referred to Allen Barra, author, "Yogi Berra: Eternal Yankee." The transcript released by the Office of the Press Secretary also included the reading of the citations.

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

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