

*Administration of Barack Obama, 2016*

## **Remarks at a Reception for the National Museum of African American History and Culture**

*September 23, 2016*

*The President.* Well, welcome, everybody. This is an exceptionally good-looking group. [Laughter] And there are just so many friends here that it feels like one of our house parties—[laughter]—but there's no dancing this afternoon. We're here just to acknowledge what an extraordinary achievement has been accomplished by Mr. Lonnie Bunch and everybody who helped make this day possible.

Now, I want to just talk about Lonnie for a second. When Lonnie first came here from Chicago to start work on this museum a decade ago, he could not even find somebody to give him a key to his office. [Laughter] Nobody had heard of this museum. And now you cannot miss it.

*Audience members.* Yes!

*The President.* A breathtaking new building right in the heart of the National Mall and that is what we call progress.

*Audience member.* Yes!

*The President.* It could not have been done without the persistence, the wisdom, the dedication, the savvy, the ability to make people feel guilty—[laughter]—the begging, the deal-making, and just the general street smarts of Lonnie—

*Audience member.* That's right.

*The President.* —and his entire team. So please give him a big round of applause for all the work that he has done.

But of course, this is also about more than Lonnie. This is about people who for more than a century, advocated and organized and raised funds and donated artifacts so that the story of the African American experience could take its rightful place in our national memory. It's a story that is full of tragedy and setbacks, but also great joy and great victories. And it is a story that is not just part of the past, but it is alive and well today in every corner of America. And that's certainly true today in this house, a house that was built by slaves.

*Audience members.* Yes. Yes.

*The President.* Now, I can't name everybody that is here, but I'm going to have to give you a little bit of a taste. This room is like a living museum of its own. Right now Madame Tussauds would be very jealous. [Laughter]

We've got icons of the entertainment industry like Quincy Jones and Dick Gregory and Phylicia Rashad.

*Audience members.* Yes!

*The President.* We've got the first Black woman in space, Mae Jemison. And we have the woman who owns the universe, Oprah Winfrey. [Laughter]

We've got those drum majors for justice, like John Lewis.

*Audience members.* Yes!

*The President.* And Andrew Young.

*Audience members.* Yes!

*The President.* And C.T. Vivian.

*Audience member.* There you go!

*The President.* And Jesse Jackson.

*Audience members.* Yes!

*The President.* And we've got the next generation of warriors for justice, like Brittany Packnett and DeRay Mckesson.

We've got personal heroes of mine like Harry Belafonte, who still is the best looking man in the room at 90-something years old. [*Laughter*] I'm just telling the truth. [*Laughter*]

So this is an extraordinary group. But the thing about this museum is that it's more about—it's more than just telling stories about the famous. It's not just about the icons. There is plenty of space for Harriet Tubman and Dr. King and Muhammed Ali. But what makes the museum so powerful and so visceral is that it's the story of all of us.

*Audience members.* Yes!

*The President.* The folks whose names you never heard of, but whose contributions, day after day, decade after decade, combined to push us forward and the entire Nation forward.

It's the maids who decided, you know what, I'm tired of segregation, and I'm going to walk for my freedom. It's the porters who not only worked tirelessly to support their families, but ultimately helped bring about the organization that led to better working conditions for all Americans here in the United States. It's about our moms and grandparents and uncles and aunts who just did the right thing and raised great families, despite assaults on their dignity on every single day.

You see it in the dignity of the artifacts that are in the museum: the dignity of an enslaved family, what it must have been like to try to live in that tiny cabin; those slaves who dared to marry, even though it was illegal for them to do so; folks who were forced to sit in the back of a train, but went about their business anyway and tried to instill in their children a sense that this isn't who we are and there's going to be more someday.

You see it in the men and the women who rushed to the warfronts to secure all of our freedom, understanding that when they came home they might not yet be free; the students who walked passed angry crowds to integrate our schools; the families huddling around a Bible to steel their faith for the challenges ahead; that quiet, determined dignity and hope.

Everybody here has somebody in mind when we think of those kinds of folks, who couldn't make it to this room, but whose stories are our stories——

*Audience member.* Yes.

*The President.* ——and whose stories are represented at this museum. It might be an ancestor who ran to freedom or an aunt or uncle who pushed back against Jim Crow or a friend who marched or sat in. Or it might be young people who were organizing against cynicism today.

But the point is that all of us cannot forget that the only reason that we're standing here is because somebody somewhere stood up for us: stood up when it was risky, stood up when it was not popular. And somehow, standing up together managed to change the world.

You know, the timing of this is fascinating—[*laughter*].

*Audience member.* Yes.

*The President.* —because in so many ways, it is the best of times, but in many ways, these are also troubled times.

*Audience member.* Yes.

*Audience member.* Yes, it is. Yes.

*The President.* History doesn't always move in a straight line.

*Audience member.* That's right.

*The President.* And without vigilance, we can go backwards as well as forwards.

*Audience members.* That's right. That's right.

*The President.* And so part of the reason that I am so happy the museum is opening this weekend is because it allows all of us as Americans to put our current circumstances—

*Audience member.* Yes.

*The President.* —in a historical context.

*Audience members.* That's right. Yes! Yes!

*The President.* My hope is that as people are seeing what's happened in Tulsa or Charlotte on television and perhaps are less familiar with not only the history of the African American experience, but also how recent some of these challenges have been, upon visiting the museum, may step back and say, I understand.

*Audience member.* Yes.

*The President.* I sympathize. I empathize. I can see why folks might feel angry, and I want to be part of the solution—

*Audience member.* Yes!

*The President.* —as opposed to resisting change.

*Audience member.* That's right.

*The President.* My hope is that Black folks watching those same images on television, and then seeing the history represented at this museum, can say to themselves, the struggles we're going through today are connected to the past, and yet all that progress we've made tells me that I cannot and will not sink into despair.

*Audience members.* Yes!

*The President.* Because if we join hands, and if we do things right, if we maintain our dignity, and we continue to appeal to the better angels of this Nation, progress will be made.

I was telling Michelle—many of you know I get 10 letters a day from constituents, and it's a great way for me to keep a pulse on how folks other than the pundits on cable TV are thinking. [*Laughter*] And it's a—I know it's a representative group because sometimes people

say, Mr. President, we just love you, and we especially love Michelle. [Laughter] And you're doing such a great job and thank you. And then, there are others who write and say, Mr. President, you're an idiot—[laughter]—and you've ruined this country. And so I know I'm getting a real—[laughter]—sampling of American public opinion.

Last night, as I was reading through my letters, I'd say about half of them said, Mr. President, why are you always against police? And why aren't you doing enough to deal with these rioters and the violence? And then, the other half were with some Black folks saying, Mr. President, why aren't you doing something about the police? [Laughter] And when are we actually going to get justice?

And I understand the nature of that argument because this is a dialogue we've been having for 400 years.

*Audience members.* Yes! Tell the truth!

*The President.* And the fact of the matter is, is that one of the challenges we have in generating a constructive discussion about how to solve these problems is because what people see on television and what they hear on the radio is bereft of context and ignores history.

*Audience member.* Yes!

*The President.* And so people are just responding as if none of what's represented in this museum ever happened. And that's true for all of us, not just some of us.

And so when I imagine children—White, Black, Latino, Asian, Native American—wandering through that museum and sitting at that lunch counter and imagining what it would be like to stand on that auction block—

*Audience member.* Oh, yes!

*The President.* —and then also looking at Shaq's shoes—[laughter]—and Chuck Berry's red Cadillac—[laughter]—my hope is, is that this complicated, difficult, sometimes harrowing, but I believe ultimately triumphant, story will help us talk to each other.

*Audience member.* That's right!

*The President.* And more important, listen to each other, and even more important, see each other—

*Audience members.* Yes! Yes!

*The President.* —and recognize the common humanity that makes America what it is. So that's a lot of weight to put on one institution.

[At this point, the First Lady patted National Museum of African American History and Culture Director Lonnie G. Bunch's shoulder.]

*The First Lady.* But you can do it. [Laughter]

*The President.* But Michelle and I, having taken Michelle's mom and our daughters to see it, we feel confident that it will not just meet expectations, but far exceed them. And it would not have happened without all of you, so you should be very, very proud.

Congratulations. God bless you. God bless America. Thank you.

NOTE: The President spoke at 4:51 p.m. in the Grand Foyer at the White House. In his remarks, he referred to musicians Quincy D. Jones, Jr., Harold G. Belafonte, Jr., and Chuck Berry; comedian Richard C. Gregory; actor Phylicia Rashad; former astronaut and physician Mae C. Jemison; Oprah Winfrey, chairman and chief executive officer, HARPO Entertainment Group; civil rights activists Andrew J. Young, Jr., Cordy T. Vivian, Jesse L. Jackson, Sr., and DeRay Mckesson; Brittany N. Packnett, vice president of national community alliances, Teach For America; and former National Basketball Association player Shaquille O'Neal. He also referred to his mother-in-law Marian Shields Robinson.

*Categories:* Addresses and Remarks : National Museum of African American History and Culture, White House reception.

*Locations:* Washington, DC.

*Names:* Belafonte, Harold G., Jr.; Berry, Chuck; Bunch, Lonnie G.; Gregory, Richard C.; Jackson, Jesse L., Sr.; Jemison, Mae C.; Jones, Quincy D., Jr.; Lewis, John R.; Mckesson, DeRay; Obama, Malia; Obama, Michelle; Obama, Natasha "Sasha"; O'Neal, Shaquille; Packnett, Brittany N.; Rashad, Phylicia; Robinson, Marian Shields; Vivian, Cordy T.; Winfrey, Oprah; Young, Andrew J.

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