

**Remarks on Presenting the Presidential Medal of Freedom to Jerry A. West**  
*September 5, 2019*

*The President.* Well, thank you very much for coming today. It's my privilege to award our Nation's highest civilian honor, the Presidential Medal of Freedom, to a remarkable man, Jerry West. Jerry, I'd like to congratulate you on this tremendous achievement. And congratulations to your family. Congratulations, Jerry. Fantastic.

We're delighted to be joined by Jerry's wife Karen and their wonderful family. And thank you very much, everybody. Look at that family, huh? You did a good job. [*Laughter*] It's beautiful.

We're also pleased to have with us Senator Joe Manchin and Governor Jim Justice, two terrific people. Jim? Thank you. Stand up, Jim, in case they can't see you. [*Laughter*] Now you can see him. That's great. Great to have you. Joe, thank you very much. Thank you both for being here. They're busy. They're very busy people, and I think we're going to meet on a certain subject later on, Joe. And that's good.

Jerry was born in Chelyan, West Virginia, in 1938, the fifth of six children. He grew up hiking in the woods, fishing in the clear water, and exploring the beautiful mountains of West Virginia, a great, great State. I shouldn't say this, Joe, but I won it by 43 points.

*Senator Joseph A. Manchin III.* Yes, you did. I remember that.

*The President.* That's a lot.

*Sen. Manchin.* I remember it well.

*The President.* We love West Virginia. Probably helped you getting this award today. [*Laughter*] When you come from West Virginia, we like you, Jerry.

But more than anything else Jerry liked doing is playing basketball in West Virginia. And starting at age 6, he taught himself on the dirt surfaces of his neighborhood's backyard. When it rained, his sister would call him and say, it's called "the mud wallow." Do you remember that at all, Jerry? The "mud wallow."

*Mr. West.* Absolutely.

*The President.* But nothing ever stopped him. Jerry later reflected that: "Everything I did, I tried to do perfectly. Not just well, but perfectly." And it hasn't changed, I don't think, too much, has it?

We ended a great, great senior year. Jerry spent it in high school with a West Virginia scoring record of 1,501 points. Approximately 60 major colleges and universities tried to recruit Jerry, but he decided, very intelligently, to stay in West Virginia. And he went to West Virginia University in 1956.

Donning his famous number "44" jersey, he set 17 Mountaineer records, was named the NCAA's Most Outstanding Player in 1959, and was a two-time consensus All-American. Wow. West Virginia won 87 percent of the games in which Jerry was in the lineup and won the Southern Conference all 3 years he played varsity.

After graduating, Jerry played on the 1960 U.S.A. Olympic Team, which swept every matchup, including a much-anticipated showdown with the Soviet Union. In that game, Jerry was

the highest scorer, accounting for nearly a quarter of America's points. And to this day, the Olympic Gold Medal is his most prized possession. Is that still so?

*Mr. West.* That's right.

*The President.* Well, that's pretty good, Jerry. You have plenty of possessions. [Laughter] I don't know, maybe we'll top it today. I don't know. We're going to see. [Laughter]

Jerry then joined the Los Angeles Lakers; we all know that. And in the years that followed, he was to become a legend and made plays that will be remembered forever. I know many of them. In a January 1962 game against the New York Knicks, Jerry scored nearly half of the Lakers' total, setting a personal scoring record of 63 points in less than 40 minutes. In game 3 of 1962 Finals against the Celtics, Jerry rallied the Lakers and tried it—and tried very hard, I will tell you. He tried so hard, and that was a great rally, and he was up 115 to 115, with only 3 seconds left.

The Celtics had the ball, and Sam Jones—he was a good one too, wasn't he, huh? Sam Jones—they're all good on that team—passed to the legendary Bob Cousy, who was here a few weeks ago. And I don't know if he'd want this story told, so we won't; we'll tell it very quietly. But Jerry suddenly rushed forward, stole the ball before it reached Cousy, and made a layup in the final second to win the game. In that iconic 1962 season, Jerry earned the nickname of "Mr. Clutch," a name that stuck.

Over the course of his 14 NBA seasons, he broke the record for the most points scored in the history of the Lakers, was named the NBA Finals MVP, and was inducted into the Basketball Hall of Fame. But perhaps the greatest commemoration of his legacy was the legendary playing career—is the NBA logo. Today, the silhouette of Jerry West is displayed on every uniform, court, and basketball in the league. Still the same one, Jerry, right? Huh? We don't want them to change it, do we? Better not change it.

*Mr. West.* You never know today.

*The President.* I don't know. You never know.

After his playing career ended in 1974, Jerry went on to coach the Lakers for three seasons and later served as general manager and executive vice president of basketball operations for nearly 20 years. In the summer of 1996, he succeeded in securing both Kobe Bryant and Shaquille O'Neal—two truly great players—creating an unstoppable force in the NBA. Under his management, the Lakers won four championships, and he was named Executive of the Year in 1995.

Jerry went on to serve as the president of basketball operations for the struggling Memphis Grizzlies, where he took them to the playoffs three times and was named Executive of the Year again in 2004. He then joined the executive board of the Warriors.

Recently, he became a consultant for the Clippers and helped sign Kawhi Leonard, who really has played—he's some player. We were talking about that. And the combination of the two of them is going to be a very interesting season. I think you're pretty proud of that group, huh?

*Mr. West.* Yes.

*The President.* We're going to see. You had some great ones.

Jerry is one of the greatest negotiators, managers, and executives in the history of the NBA.

In addition to his sterling professional career, Jerry helped raise millions of dollars for charity in Los Angeles, contributed to a flood of relief efforts in West Virginia, and generally, just incredible supporter of West Virginia and West Virginia University.

He has also brought awareness to the risks of atrial fibrillation. Oh, I didn't know that, Jerry. That's very good. That's big stuff for you, right? That's very good.

*Mr. West.* That's all good.

*The President.* That's very good. And is a passionate supporter of our Nation's veterans. Jerry works harder than just about anybody I can imagine, helping our Nation's veterans. Jerry West is one extraordinary American.

And I'd now like to ask the Military Aide to come forward and present Jerry Alan West with the Presidential Medal of Freedom. This is so richly deserved. Thank you very much. Thank you, Jerry. Congratulations.

[*At this point, Lt. Col. Michael E. Ziegelhofer, USA, Army Aide to the President, read the citation, and the President presented the medal, assisted by Maj. Brandon M. Westling, USAF, Air Force Aide to the President.*]

*Mr. West.* Well, first of all, thank you, Mr. President. Well, where shall I begin? You know, it never ceases to amaze me the places you can go in this world chasing a bouncing ball. My chase began in Chelyan, West Virginia, where I strung a wire basket with no net to the side of a bridge. If your shot didn't go in, the ball rolled down a long bank, and you would be chasing it forever. So you'd better make it.

I was a dreamer. My family didn't have much, but we had a clear view of the Appalachian Mountains, and I like—I'd set alone on our front porch and wonder, "If I ever make it to the top of that mountain, what will I see on the other side?" Well, I did make it to the other side, and my dreams have come true. I've been able to see it—I've been able to see the sides thanks to all the—thanks to that bouncing ball.

I spent my childhood in West Virginia and my adulthood in Los Angeles—two of the most profoundly different places in this country—and I've been shaped by wonderful people in both.

I would have never made it through West Virginia University without Ann Dinardi, a surrogate mother of sorts, who gave me a room in her house and constantly fed me to pack weight on my 160-pound frame. She cussed me when I needed it, and boy, that was a lot—like the time I fled back home before my freshman year personally convinced that I did not belong in college—and hugged me when I needed it, which was probably at the same time.

Ann was strong, sassy, Italian, not so much different than another incredible woman that I eventually met in Los Angeles and married. Thank you, Karen, for accompanying me and tolerating me on this long, rich, American journey.

I've experienced a country at war, a country at peace, a time when we huddled around a radio with terrible reception to hear President Roosevelt's weekly addresses to a time when we read on our cell phone President Trump's instantaneous tweets. You're pretty good at that, by the way.  
[*Laughter*]

*The President.* That's true.

*Mr. West.* I suffered excruciating losses, both personally and professionally. I'm not going to say how many NBA Final losses—those damn Celtics—[*laughter*]—and exhilarating victories. But the one I cherish most was with a group of fellow American amateurs at the 1960 Olympics.

As I stood on the Gold Medal stand in Rome next to my friend and soon-to-be adversary, Oscar Robertson, I thought about my brother David who had died fighting in Korea when I was 13 and how proud I was to represent the United States of America and West Virginia—and the State of West Virginia.

I tried in my life to do for others what David did for me: lead, protect, and assist whenever possible. The David West and Willie Akers Academic Center at West Virginia University is a place where I hope young men and women in my home State can also dream about the top of the mountain and take the first steps towards realizing those dreams.

I am surrounded here today by my wonderful family. Although my sister Hannah and Barbara are not able to make this trip, I've been blessed with five remarkable sons: David, Michael, Mark, Ryan, and Jonnie.

I've been privileged to work for four fantastic basketball franchises: The Los Angeles Lakers, where I celebrated the most memorable triumphs, where I mourned the most painful setbacks, and partnered with a true visionary, Jerry Buss, who changed the landscape of professional sports; Michael Heisley, the Memphis Grizzlies, gave me an opportunity to rebuild a franchise looking for its way; the Golden State Warriors, where I witnessed some of the most beautiful basketball ever played alongside a most unique and successful ownership group; and now the L.A. Clippers. I work with an incredible and an inspirational leader, Steve Ballmer, and maybe I'm being prejudiced, but the best staff that I've ever known.

I've had many great coaches and teammates I will never forget. As a player, I was flanked by the great Elgin Baylor, the most supportive and the greatest player of that era, and later, the great Wilt Chamberlain.

As an executive, I've been just as fortunate. I have been involved with a truly incredible group of the greatest players who have ever played this game: Kareem, Worthy, Magic, Shaquille, Kobe with the Lakers; Steph, Klay, Kevin at the Golden State Warriors; and now Kawhi Leonard and Paul George with the Clippers. I marvel at them, at the joy they brought basketball fans all over the world.

The bouncing ball brought me there and here. When Karen first read on the internet that I was going to receive the medal—Presidential Medal of Freedom, we were both shocked and surprised and amused. I thought it was a joke. When—then, when West Virginia Senator Joe Manchin confirmed the honor—I'm sure he had a big part in the selection. Thank you, Joe, for being here today. And also, my friend, the Governor of West Virginia, Jim Justice. I appreciate you here today also, Jim.

I looked at the list of other honorees and was inspired by the names of some on that page: Warren Buffett and Bill Gates, philanthropic champions; Nelson Mandela, Martin Luther King, César Chávez, Simon Wiesenthal, and Desmond Tutu, legendary leaders; Muhammad Ali, Bill Russell, Kareem Abdul-Jabbar, athlete activists; Michael Jordan, Tiger Woods, Stevie Wonder, excellence personified; John Wooden, Frank Robinson, Arnold Palmer, and Vince Scully, friends I try to emulate. I swear my name is going to look like a misprint on this list.

Mr. President, thanks for you for including me on this incredible group of people.

*The President.* Great job, Jerry.

*Mr. West.* Thank you.

*The President.* Congratulations to Jerry. And also, Jonnie, congratulations on your marriage to a great golfer, Michelle Wie, who is here today. And thank you, Michelle, for being here.

Thank you, everybody. It's a great honor. He's a great man, a great player. And you're going to be around a long time.

*Mr. West.* Well, thank you.

*The President.* Thank you, Jerry, very much.

*Mr. West.* I appreciate it.

NOTE: The President spoke at 4:50 p.m. in the Oval Office at the White House. In his remarks, Mr. West referred to former National Basketball Association players Oscar Robertson and Earvin "Magic" Johnson, Jr.; Steve Ballmer, chairman, National Basketball Association's Los Angeles Clippers; W. Stephen Curry II, point guard, and Klay A. Thompson, shooting guard, Golden State Warriors; and Kevin Durant, small forward, Brooklyn Nets, formerly of the Golden State Warriors. He also referred to his sisters Hannah Bowman and Barbara West. The transcript released by the Office of the Press Secretary also included the reading of the citation.

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*Names:* Bryant, Kobe; Cousy, Robert J.; George, Paul; Jones, Samuel; Justice, James C., II; Leonard, Kawhi A.; Manchin, Joseph A., III; O'Neal, Shaquille; West, Jerry A.; West, Jonnie; West, Karen; Wie, Michelle; Ziegelhofer, Michael E.

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