

Administration of Joseph R. Biden, Jr., 2024

Remarks on Presenting the Presidential Medal of Freedom

May 3, 2024

Hello, hello, hello. Please have a seat.

I think I told my buddy John Kerry, for the first 2 years, every time I heard "Hail to the Chief," I'd turn and look around, "Where the hell is he?" [*Laughter*]

Anyway, it's great to see you all. And on behalf of Jill, Kamala, and Doug, thank you all for being here in one of our favorite events at the White House.

Sixty-one years ago, President Kennedy established the Presidential Medal of Freedom to recognize, quote, "any person who has made an especially meritorious contribution to the security of national—and national interests of the United States or world peace, cultural, or other significant public, private—public or private endeavors."

You know, in the first class of medal recipients was a great, great American writer, E.B. White. Years after receiving the medal, he received a letter from someone who was losing faith in humanity. And E.B. White replied, and I quote: "Relentless—relentlessness, curiosity, inventiveness, ingenuity have led to deep trouble. We can only hope that these same traits will enable us to claw our way out. Hang on to your hat, hang on to your hope, wind the clock, and tomorrow is another day."

Today we have another extraordinary honor to bestow one of the Nation's highest civilian honors of 19 incredible people whose relentless curiosity, inventiveness, ingenuity, and hope have kept faith in a better tomorrow.

You know, we see that faith in Father Greg Boyle, who has changed countless lives as pastor of a disadvantaged Catholic parish in Los Angeles. Father, you—through your pioneering gang intervention programs.

You know, I always kid, I went to—I was taught by the Norbertines in a public school. Well, you know, they always were worried we were going to go to Jesuit colleges because they said you guys are too liberal.

Thank God for the Jebbies. [*Laughter*] Thank God. That's what my staff hates me doing: ad-libbing. [*Laughter*]

Your service as a Jesuit priest over four decades reminds us of the power of redemption, rehabilitation, and our obligation to those who have been condemned or counted out. Thank you, Father Greg, for your amazing grace. Thank you.

For some of you today, I know from personal experience that you wish you never had to be at an event like this one without a piece of your soul having been gone.

Judy Shepard, it's been 25 years, Judy, since you last spoke of [to; White House correction] your beloved Matthew. Your husband Dennis is here today as well. The brutal murder of your son galvanized a movement in a—into a law in his name—protect LBG—LB—LGBTQ Americans. Your relentless advocacy is a reminder that we must give hate no safe harbor and that we can turn it into purpose and that pain you felt into significant purpose. And you've done just that. Thank you.

And today we honor Medgar Evers and his family's pain and purpose: an Army veteran who worked tirelessly to end segregation in Mississippi to deliver the promise of America to all

Americans; a patriot who was gunned down by the poison of White supremacy. But his spirit endures.

Joining us is Medgar's daughter Reena, who was just—was 8—8 years old when she walked out and saw Daddy in the driveway—was taken from her 4 days before Father's Day. She's here on behalf of the family and her mother—excuse me—her mother Myrlie, who was unable to attend—to travel today.

I want to thank Myrlie for her work to seek justice for Medgar and for forging her own civil rights legacy—not just Medgar's, her own civil rights legacy.

In 2021, in this very room, I signed one of the most important laws of my Presidency, making Juneteenth the first new Federal holiday since Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., Day. The first person I handed the pen to was Ms. Opal Lee, the grandmother of the movement that helped make it possible.

Juneteenth is a day of profound, profound weight and power to remember the original sin of slavery and the extraordinary capacity to emerge from the most painful moments with a better vision of ourselves. Ms. Opal Lee made it her mission to make history, not erase it. And we're a better nation because of you, Opal. Thank you.

Born in Philadelphia, the cradle of our democracy, Dr. Clarence B. Jones wielded a pen as a sword and gave words to the movement that generated in freedom for millions of people. A speechwriter for and lawyer for Dr. King, he helped define the enduring ideas included in the "Dream" that will be ever for—engraved in the ethos of America. Letting freedom ring, Dr. Clarence B. Jones. Thank you, Dr. Jones.

And before social media and clickbait news—[laughter]—Phil Donahue broadcast the power of personal stories in living rooms all across America. He helped change hearts and minds through honest and open dialogue. And, over the course of a defining career in television and through thousands of daily conversations, Phil Donahue steered the Nation's discourse and spoke to our better angels. I wish you were still speaking there, pal. It made a big difference.

From finance to media to philanthropy, Michael Bloomberg has revolutionized our economy. He's transformed how we consume information. He's changed us. He's challenged us, as well, to solve the toughest challenges, from gun violence to climate change. And as mayor, he rebuilt the city of New York after 9/11, channeling our spirit of resilience as a nation and a beacon to the world. Michael, thank you, Mr. Mayor. Thank you for a career of service.

I first met Katie Ledecky in 2012. I thought, "My God, what an athlete." She won her first Olympic gold at age 15. And though—through hard work and humility, she's won 10 Olympic medals—10; 21 world championship titles; and became the greatest female swimmer of all time. She continues to compete this summer in the Paralympics [Paris Olympics; White House correction] at age 27, which some say is old for swimming. I think—[laughter]—27—don't let age get in your way. [Laughter] I mean, you know what I mean?

Katie, age is just a number, kid. [Laughter] And I can't wait to welcome you back to the White House with more medals from Team U.S.A. I really mean it, Katie. You're the best. The finest woman swimmer in American history.

Jim Thorpe, a one-of-a-kind champion. I grew up in Scranton, Pennsylvania, hearing from my grandpop—his name was Ambrose Finnegan. And you know, he was an All-American at Santa Clara playing football back in 1905. And I grew up always hearing about Jim Thorpe—I'm serious—as the greatest athlete—not just the greatest ball player, the greatest athlete of all time. He talked about him all the time.

In 1912, he became the first Native American athlete to win an Olympic gold medal. He set world records in the decathlon. He was a professional football player, a professional baseball player, a professional basketball player. Jim Thorpe showcased unparalleled—unparalleled—athleticism, and he transcended race—transcended racial barriers and the power of perseverance, sheer will, and determination.

Thank you, Lynn, who is Jim's oldest living grandchild, for accepting this medal on his behalf. He was incredible. Incredible guy. *[Applause]* After hearing my grandpop, I used to go to sleep in Scranton thinking, "God, I wish I could meet him." *[Laughter]* I'm not—incredible. Anyway. I'm going to get carried away here. *[Laughter]*

For most of the American Dream: to be successful in whatever endeavor you choose here on Earth. For Dr. Ellen Ochoa, this is a dream from the heavens—her dream from the heavens. A granddaughter of Mexican immigrants, Ellen is the first Hispanic woman to go to space, ushering in a whole new age of space exploration and proving what it means for every generation to dream, to reach for the stars, and to get there. And I tell you what, you're getting there, kid. Thank you so much. Thank you, thank you, thank you.

And, Dr. Jane Rigby, a daughter of my home State of Delaware, I might add. *[Laughter]* She's not only—she's not only—the only person receiving this medal, she's a—she is a—you know, it's not the reason she's getting it is because she's from Delaware; although, I keep looking—*[inaudible]*. *[Laughter]*

She is a groundbreaking astrophysicist in charge of the most powerful telescope ever launched into space. Did you ever see some of the images? They're breathtaking—light-years—millions of light-years away.

She's also a long-time advocate of inclusivity in the sciences. By piecing—by piercing *[piecing; White House correction]* together and—everything that she's done and by making sure that the grand story of the universe and unlocking the secrets of the galaxies, Dr. Rigby sparks a sense of wonder deep in our souls. You ought to see some of the photographs—I mean, some of those telescopes. It's mind-boggling to me.

For embodying the American Dream and helping Americans reach theirs also, we want to honor a very good friend of mine, who is not here today: Frank Lautenberg. An Army veteran from New Jersey and the longest serving Senator, who I served with, Frank is remembered as a tireless advocate for consumers, public health, and safety.

Bonnie, thank you for being here to accept the medal on Frank's behalf.

Teresa Romero embodies the essential truth about America: We're a nation of immigrants where everyone is entitled to be treated with dignity and respect. The first Latina to become president of a national union in the—a national union in the United States, she made a life better for thousands of farmworkers who put food on our tables—all of them. And protecting them from extreme heat, securing overtime pay, she shows us what it means to be a champion for dignity to work.

And when—I told you, when I ran the first time in 1972 to the United States Senate, he was organizing farmworkers in the State of Delaware. And Nixon won my State by 60 percent of the vote, but I was down and championing—just learning from him. And guess what? I won anyway. *[Laughter]*

But anyway, thank you very much for all you've done.

Over four decades and on and off the screen, Michael Yeoh—Michelle Yeoh, excuse me, has shattered stereotypes and glass ceilings to enrich and enhance American culture. Her roles transcend gender *[genres; White House correction]*, cultures, and languages—martial—from

martial arts to romantic comedies to science fiction—to show us what we have—all have in common. As the first Asian actor to win an Oscar as Best Actress, she bridges cultures not only to entertain, but also inspire and open hearts. And that's what she keeps doing. Congratulations.

Another inspiration—not just to me, but to Bob Dole—[*laughter*—God love him—was Elizabeth Dole. You're a trailblazer, Elizabeth, the first woman in nearly every public service position you held over four decades. You served—I served with her in the United States Senate. And she's a fierce advocate for military and families and their caregivers. She's a true partner who—and her beloved Bob was a dear friend, who I miss dearly. And he was a friend, as you know. I loved him. Thank you. Thanks. Elizabeth, the country owes you a deep debt of gratitude, a significant debt of gratitude.

Throughout a defining career in public service, this guy, Al Gore, has demonstrated a love of country that showed the world how to lead. I worked with Al when he was a Senator and as—when he was Vice President. After winning the popular vote, he accepted the outcome of a disputed Presidential election for the sake of unity and trust in our institutions. That, to me, was amazing, what you did, Al. I mean, I won't go into that, but—[*laughter*].

And Al has continued to serve by leading a global movement to fight climate crisis, earning him the Nobel Prize in 2007. God love him.

Al, history is going to remember you for many reasons. Among them will be your honesty, your integrity, and the legacy of your service. So thank you, Al. You're first rate. Thank you.

I've served and work closely as Senator and as Vice President and then as President with this guy: John Kerry—John Kerry. I was Vice President when he was Secretary of State. And, in my administration, he led our efforts to—across the globe, the first Special Presidential Envoy for Climate.

Throughout six decades—throughout six decades—of service to the Nation, John, as a soldier, a Senator, a statesman—John Kerry was a patriot of the highest order. I can personally attest that my dear friend has as much moral courage in his pursuit of American politics as he did physical courage that earned him a Silver Star in Vietnam. You're the real deal, John. You are the real deal, pal. I have enormous admiration.

In my view—excuse the point of personal privilege—the last two guys I mentioned both should have been standing here at this podium.

A beloved daughter of a Congressman and the mayor of Baltimore—as my dad, who was born in Baltimore, would say——

[At this point, the President briefly imitated a Baltimore accent.]

——Baltimore—[*laughter*—Nancy Pelosi grew up knowing the power and purpose of politics. A historic figure as the first woman Speaker of the House of Representatives, she used her superpowers to pass some of the most significant laws in our Nation's history.

On January 6, Nancy stood in the breach and defended democracy. And with her husband Paul, they stood up to extremism and absolute—with absolute courage—physical courage.

Nancy is a brilliant, practical, principled, and determined leader. Her accomplishments are overwhelming. And I predict—and I've said this to her for a while—history will remember you, Nancy, as the greatest Speaker of the House of Representatives ever. I mean it. We've had some great Speakers, Nancy, but I love you, kid. I really do love you. [*Laughter*] You're the best. You're the best.

De Tocqueville said, "If America ever ceases to be good, America will cease to be great." That's one of Jim Clyburn's favorite quotes. Always grounded in faith, family, and service, Jim

has guided South Carolina and our country with a steady hand and an honest heart for over the last half century. And I could say this without fear of contradiction: I would not be standing here as President and making these awards were it not for Jim. I mean that sincerely. And neither of us would be standing here without Emily Clyburn, a woman of enormous character, who we all miss.

We're a great nation, Jim, because we have good people, like Jim and Emily Clyburn and our honorees today, all of them. My fellow Americans, Jim is the best. Thank you, Jim.

What I had to keep doing when I was writing these introductions is make them shorter and shorter and shorter, because there's so much more to say about each one of them, but we'd be here for 12 hours. *[Laughter]* But you all know how incredible they are, an incredible group of people.

And so, ladies and gentlemen, my fellow Americans, I congratulate the Presidential Freedom of Medal [Medal of Freedom; White House correction] recipients and now—and their families for their relentlessness and curiosity.

And now I'm going to make sure we provide those medals and put them around your necks. So thank you very much.

[Maj. Mike R. Jones, USMC, Marine Corps Aide to the President, read the citations, and the President presented the medals, assisted by Lt. Col. Ann L. Hughes, USSF, Space Force Aide to the President. The President then concluded his remarks as follows.]

I tell you what, it makes you proud to be an American, doesn't it?

Let's give one more round of applause for this year's Presidential Freedom recipients.

NOTE: The President spoke at 5:18 p.m. in the East Room at the White House. In his remarks, he referred to Vice President Kamala D. Harris and her husband Douglas C. Emhoff; Reena Evers-Everette, daughter, and Myrlie Evers-Williams, wife, of posthumous medal recipient Medgar Evers; Gail Lynn Hannon, granddaughter of posthumous medal recipient Jim Thorpe; and Bonnie Englehardt Lautenberg, wife of posthumous medal recipient Frank R. Lautenberg. The transcript was released by the Office of the Press Secretary on May 4 and also included the reading of the citations.

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Names: Biden, Jill T.; Bloomberg, Michael R.; Boyle, Gregory J.; Clyburn, James E.; Dole, Elizabeth A.; Donahue, Phil; Emhoff, Douglas C.; Evers-Everett, Reena; Evers-Williams, Myrlie; Gore, Albert A., Jr.; Hannon, Gail Lynn; Harris, Kamala D.; Jones, Clarence B.; Kerry, John F.; Lautenberg, Bonnie Englehardt; Ledecy, Kathleen G.; Lee, Opal; Ochoa, Ellen; Pelosi, Nancy; Pelosi, Paul F., Sr.; Rigby, Jane R.; Romero, Teresa; Shepard, Dennis; Shepard, Judy; Yeoh, Michelle.

Subjects: 2021 civil unrest and violence at U.S. Capitol; Civil rights movement; Climate change; Farmworkers, labor conditions; France, 2024 Summer Olympic Games in Paris; Gun violence, prevention efforts; Juneteenth Federal holiday; Labor movement and organized labor; Lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender persons, equality; Olympic Games; Presidential Medal of Freedom; Space exploration; Swimming; Vice President; Worker protections and labor standards.

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