

Remarks on Presenting the Presidential Medals of Freedom August 8, 1994

The President. Thank you very much. Ladies and gentlemen, welcome to the White House. As you might imagine, one of the great pleasures of the Presidency is selecting recipients of the Presidential Medal of Freedom, the highest honor given to civilians by the United States of America.

If I might begin on a very personal and immediate note, last fall this annual ceremony was held on a very happy day for me and for those of us who want a safer and more humane United States. It was the day we made the Brady bill the law of the land. Today as we gather here, Congress is on the verge of voting on the most comprehensive anticrime bill in history. But that bill has been held hostage for 11 days by certain special interest groups. So as we recognize the contributions of civilians to our country's way of life, I'd like to take this opportunity to call on those groups who are blocking the crime bill to let it come to a vote and ask the other citizens of the United States to ask the Congress for the same thing. Many people we honor here today have given their whole lives to enriching the fabric of the future, and we can do no less.

This afternoon we will present the Presidential Medal of Freedom to nine remarkable individuals whose service to our democracy and to humanity has advanced the common interest of freedom-loving people, not only here at home but throughout the world: Herbert Block, the late Cesar Chavez, Arthur Flemming, Dorothy Height, Barbara Jordan, Lane Kirkland, Robert Michel, and Sargent Shriver.

The medals these Americans receive today has a special history. It was established by President Truman in 1945 at first to reward notable service in the war. In 1963 President Kennedy amended the award for distinguished civilian service in peacetime. The honorees that year included the singer Marian Anderson, Justice Felix Frankfurter, diplomat John McCloy, labor leader George Meany, the writer E.B. White, playwright Thornton Wilder, and the artist Andrew Wyeth. By the time that first ceremony was held here in the White House in December of 1963, President Johnson had added to the

roll of names President Kennedy and His Holiness Pope John XXIII.

Listen to this: At that time, Under Secretary of State George Ball said that the President is establishing what we can proudly call an American civil honors list. How many of our greatest citizens, who went on to achieve other things, said that the greatest thing that could ever be said about them was that they were good citizens. That is true in every way of those we honor today.

Herbert Block, or "Herblock" as we know him, became an editorial cartoonist with the Chicago Daily News in 1929, not a very good year to begin writing funny cartoons. [Laughter] His long and prolific career has spanned the Presidencies of 11 different Presidents. The fact that he gets to choose the targets in cartoons may have something to do with the longevity of his career. His cartoons have appeared in the Washington Post since 1946, the year I was born. [Laughter] He educates and persuades public opinion with effectiveness, artistry, warmth, and great good humor. He has a big heart. He sides with the little guy, people of common sense, and all who hold healthy irreverence for any sort of pretensions.

Cesar Chavez, before his death in April of last year, had become a champion of working people everywhere. Born into Depression-era poverty in Arizona in 1927, he served in the United States Navy in the Second World War and rose to become one of our greatest advocates of nonviolent change. He was, for his own people, a Moses figure. The farm workers who labored in the fields and yearned for respect and self-sufficiency pinned their hopes on this remarkable man, who with faith and discipline, with soft-spoken humility and amazing inner strength led a very courageous life and in so doing brought dignity to the lives of so many others and provided for us inspiration for the rest of our Nation's history. We are honored to have his wife, friend, and longtime working partner, Helen Chavez, to be with us today to receive the award.

Arthur Flemming served every President from Franklin Roosevelt to Ronald Reagan as the Republican member of the Civil Service Commis-

sion, as a member of the Hoover commission on the executive branch established by President Truman, as Director of Defense Mobilization and a member of President Eisenhower's National Security Council, and as Secretary of Health, Education, and Welfare. In addition to being an able administrator, Dr. Flemming is also a respected educator and former journalist. Over the course of his long and eminent career in public service, he contributed to the struggles for Social Security, civil rights, and most recently health care reform, something for which the First Lady and I are particularly in his debt. These three struggles he calls the greatest domestic crusades of his lifetime.

James Grant is the remarkable executive director of the United Nations Children's Fund, UNICEF, where he has tirelessly waged a global crusade on behalf of the world's children. Like his father before him, he was born and raised in China, where he took up his family's tradition of offering assistance abroad and first went to work for the United Nations at the end of World War II. In the fall of 1992 he helped to broker a brief cease-fire during the siege of Sarajevo and personally directed the safe passage of a convoy carrying winter supplies of clothing, blankets, and food. As the international community's guardian of innocent children in troubled regions, he oversees the delivery of humanitarian assistance that without him might otherwise never reach those in need.

Dorothy Height is one of the world's most tireless and accomplished advocates of civil rights, the rights of women, and the health and stability of family and community life. From the days when she helped Eleanor Roosevelt to organize the World Youth Conference in 1938, she has remained engaged in the public arena for 60 years and more. As a leader of the National Council of Negro Women and the Young Women's Christian Association, she's been a powerful voice for equal opportunity here and in developing nations around the world. In recent years, her Black Family Reunion celebrations have reminded our society that self-help and self-reliance within loving extended families are the dominant cultural traditions of the African-American community.

For 20 years Barbara Jordan has been the most outspoken moral voice of the American political system, a position she reached soon after becoming the first black Congresswoman elected from the deep South from her native

Texas in 1972. From national platforms she has captured the Nation's attention and awakened its conscience in defense of our Constitution, the American dream, and the commonality we share as American citizens. As professor of ethics and public policy at the Lyndon B. Johnson School of Public Affairs, she ensures that the next generation of our public servants will be worthy of the legacy she has done so much to build.

Lane Kirkland has been at the center of the American labor movement for almost 50 years. After serving in the merchant marine during the Second World War and his subsequent graduation from the School of Foreign Service at Georgetown University, he became a researcher for organized labor in the same year that he worked as a 26-year-old speechwriter in the 1948 campaign of Harry Truman and his running mate, Alben Barkley. Throughout the cold war, when some leaders saw only the threats to our freedom overseas and neglected the barriers to freedom and inequality within our own land, Kirkland showed America that you can stand up to communism abroad just as forcefully as you can stand up for working men and women here at home. As president of the AFL-CIO for the last 15 years, he has helped to teach us that solidarity is a powerful word in any language and that a vibrant labor movement is essential to every free society.

Robert Michel has served in the United States House of Representatives since 1957. That is the second longest tenure of any Republican in American history. As minority leader in the House for the last 13 years, he has served his party well, but he has also served our Nation well, choosing the pragmatic but harder course of conciliation more often than the divisive but easier course of confrontation. In the best sense he is a gentleman legislator who, in spite of the great swings in public opinion from year to year, has remained always true to the mid-western values he represents so faithfully in the House. He retires at the end of this year, generally regarded by Democrats and Republicans alike as one of the most decent and respected leaders with which any President has had the privilege to work.

Sargent Shriver is the man who launched the Peace Corps 33 years ago. Because of his creativity, his idealism, his brilliance, the Peace Corps remains one of the most popular Government initiatives ever undertaken. From the time

he and his wife, Eunice, helped to organize a conference on juvenile delinquency for the Attorney General in 1947 to his efforts for public education in Chicago in the 1950's, to his leadership of Head Start and legal services and now the Special Olympics, Sargent Shriver has awakened millions of Americans, including many in this administration, to the responsibilities of service, the possibilities of change, and the sheer joy of making the effort.

These recipients of the Presidential Medal of Freedom represent different political parties, different ideologies, different professions, indeed, even different ages. Their different eras, different races, different generations in American history cannot be permitted to obscure the fact of what they share in common: an unusually profound sense of responsibility to improve the lives of their fellow men and women, to improve the future for our children, to embody the best of what we mean by the term "American citizen." By their remarkable records of service and by their incredible spirit, we have all been enriched.

And now I would ask the military aide to read the citations as I present the Medal of Freedom.

[At this point, Major Leo Mercado, Jr., USMC, Marine Corps aide to the President, read the citations, and the President presented the medals.]

The President. Ladies and gentlemen, in closing let me say that I couldn't help thinking, as the citations were read and I looked into the faces of our honorees and their families, friends, and admirers here, that we too often reserve our greatest accolades for our citizens when they are gone. I wish that Cesar Chavez could be here today. I am grateful that his wife is here, and I am so grateful that all these others are here.

Let us remember today that the greatest gift any of us can give the Founders of this Constitution and this Republic is to emulate the work of these citizens whom we honor today, every day, each in our own way.

Thank you for being here. God bless you all.

NOTE: The President spoke at 4:40 p.m. in the East Room at the White House.

Remarks at a Democratic Senatorial Campaign Committee Fundraiser

August 8, 1994

Thank you. Thank you very much, Senator Graham. Ladies and gentlemen, I hope you'll forgive me. I have my annual August ragweed voice. If you don't have allergies and you can't tell whether ragweed has come out in Washington, DC, you just wait for me to get my sort of, you know, raspy—surely there's a role for me in the movies when I talk like this. I could be the guy that delivers the bad news, and that wouldn't be any role change I would have to take. [Laughter]

I want to thank many people. I thank the incumbent Senators who are here, Senator Graham and the others who have worked so hard. I also want to congratulate the nominees who are here. We have an exceptionally outstanding group of people: Bob Carr, Alan Wheat, Tom Andrews, Sam Coppersmith, Jim Cooper, all from the House of Representatives,

and former Congressman Jim Jontz, all of whom have real records of fighting for the interests of ordinary Americans in trying to build this country and all of whom have a real chance to be elected to the United States Senate if we work hard for them.

Joel Hyatt from Ohio is not here tonight, but he and I were in law school together. He's younger than I am. Most people are these days. [Laughter] And those who aren't look younger now. Joel Hyatt began a program when we were in law school for undergraduates to tutor inner-city kids and then went on to become famous by making legal representation available to ordinary middle class folks. The program he started when we were in law school is still operating there, a real tribute to his capacity to innovate.

Richard Fisher from Texas is also not here tonight, but he is another longtime friend of