

Interview With Chris Berman of ESPN in Queens April 15, 1997

[The President's remarks are joined in progress.]

The President. And if he hadn't done what he did and Branch Rickey hadn't done what he did, PeeWee Reese hadn't run the team like he did, it would have been a very different world. But Jackie Robinson—you know, someone—maybe fate has a way of doing that in history, but he was—he had the unique blend of talent and character to do what he did. And it's made a real difference.

It made a real difference to the way people thought about race. I think that's more important than the fact that he was a great baseball player because baseball really was our national pastime then, too, and there was no competition from highly televised pro basketball or pro football or anything else. It was the thing. And so it was—as important as it was, and 3 years later basketball was integrated and other things happened—this was a huge deal. Most Americans now can't even imagine how big a deal it was.

This was the year before President Truman signed the order to integrate the Army. This was a huge deal.

Mr. Berman. It was really 15 years plus before marches in the sixties. I mean, it was so far ahead of its time——

The President. Almost a decade before Rosa Parks. And it was baseball, so it was a statement about America. Anything you said about baseball in the forties and the early fifties, it was a statement about America.

Mr. Berman. By the way, Olerud is at first base with a single; one out. But Bernard Gilkey is up.

The President. He's doing better in New York, isn't he, although——

Mr. Berman. Well, he's in another——

The President. But he's hitting well again, and it's good. It's been a good move for him.

Mr. Berman. It kind of got a little stale for him in Toronto.

The President. Yes. It's good for him.

Mr. Berman. Did you ever get up to see Jackie Robinson play? I don't know how many Cardinal games you went to. Arkansas was a good drive from there.

The President. Only one time when I was a child. My father took me on a train to St. Louis to watch a game, but they weren't playing the Dodgers. But we didn't get a television until 1956, but it was right after the '55 season, right after the Boys of Summer. So for 2 years I sat transfixed in front of my television set. And tonight we had a contest in the place where I'm sitting to see how many people could remember the names of people on the '55 team—how many names you could remember. I quit at seven. And I hadn't even thought about it since. And I still remember the first time I saw Jackie Robinson, with that hitch in his swing and the way he ran sort of almost—on television it looked almost like he was bent over. It was an amazing thing. I remember just being transfixed by it.

Mr. Berman. Well, you have these images all—the old crystal set, right, which was how you followed your baseball. And so many people did, certainly, in the fifties. When you finally saw him, or now that you've seen him afterwards on the old newsreels, et cetera, was that the image you had of him as a boy listening on the radio, or was he more impressive in person?

The President. More impressive in person. But I used to do my homework at night listening to the Cardinals games on the radio. So I—I probably shouldn't say, it's a bad example for students of today.

Mr. Berman. We all did it; we all did it.

The President. But I did. And so, he was better than I thought he would be. He was beautiful. He was fabulous, watching him.

Mr. Berman. You're excited about this evening, aren't you?

The President. I am, it's very important. I think that it's also good for baseball. This night will capture the attention of America and make everybody forget about some of the things they didn't like that happened the last 2 years and make people fall in love with baseball again, I hope.

Mr. Berman. As we did the night of the Cal Ripken thing.

The President. Yes, we did.

Mr. Berman. I have to ask you this. It's April 15th. Are your taxes done?

Apr. 15 / Administration of William J. Clinton, 1997

The President. Yes. Paid them all.

Mr. Berman. Because I might be able to get you an extension.

The President. I don't think I ought to. I've got to set a good example, you know. [Laughter] I'm surprised all these baseball players shook hands with me tonight. They make more money than Jackie Robinson did, so they probably weren't very happy to see me tonight. [Laughter]

Mr. Berman. Oh, I think they were. I think you honored everybody with your presence. Thank you for joining us.

The President. Thank you. I'm glad to be here. Thanks.

NOTE: The interview began at 8:45 p.m. at Shea Stadium. In his remarks, the President referred to civil rights activist Rosa Parks. He also referred to Executive Order 9981 of July 26, 1948 (13 FR 4313). The press release issued by the Office of the Press Secretary did not include the complete opening remarks of the President.

Remarks in Queens Celebrating the 50th Anniversary of Jackie Robinson's Integration of Major League Baseball *April 15, 1997*

Thank you very much. Ladies and gentlemen, Mrs. Robinson, members of the Robinson family. It is hard to believe that it was 50 years ago at Ebbets Field that a 28-year-old rookie changed the face of baseball and the face of America forever. Jackie Robinson scored the go-ahead run that day, and we've all been trying to catch up ever since.

Today I think every American should say a special word of thanks to Jackie Robinson and to Branch Rickey and to the members of the Dodger team who made him one of their own and proved that America is a better, stronger, richer country when we all work together and give everyone a chance. And today I think we should remember that Jackie Robinson's legacy did not end with baseball, for afterward he spent the rest of his life trying to open other doors and keep them open for all kinds of people. He knew that education, not sports, was the key to success in life for nearly everyone, and he took that message to young people wherever he went. I congratulate Rachel Robinson for continuing that mission through the work of the Jackie Robinson Foundation, which has given hundreds of young people a chance to build the life of their dreams.

I can't help thinking that if Jackie Robinson were here with us tonight, he would say that we have done a lot of good in the last 50 years, but we can do better. We have achieved equality

on the playing field, but we need to establish equality in the boardrooms of baseball and throughout corporate America. And we need to make sure that, even as we celebrate his brilliant successor Tiger Woods' victory in the Masters, we need even more of our young people from all walks of life to get their master's degrees and help to make more of their lives in this country.

And he would remind us—look around this stadium tonight—that as we sit side by side at baseball games, we must make sure that we walk out of these stadiums together. We must stand for something more significant even than a grand slam home run. We ought to have a grand slam society, a good society where all of us have a chance to work together for a better tomorrow for our children. Let that be the true legacy of Jackie Robinson's wonderful, remarkable career and life.

Ladies and gentlemen, please welcome Mrs. Rachel Robinson.

NOTE: The President spoke at 9:39 p.m. at Shea Stadium. In his remarks, he referred to Branch Rickey, owner of the Brooklyn Dodgers in 1947, and professional golfer Tiger Woods.