

Remarks on Presenting the Congressional Space Medal of Honor
Posthumously to Roger B. Chaffee and Edward H. White II
December 17, 1997

Dr. Gibbons, Mr. Goldin, Congressman Sensenbrenner, to Edward White and the White family, and Martha Chaffee and the Chaffee family, and Mrs. Grissom, other representatives of astronauts' families that are here.

A generation ago, President Kennedy challenged our Nation and asked God's blessing to undertake the most hazardous and dangerous and greatest adventure on which man has ever embarked. His challenge in 1961 to send a man to the moon and bring him safely back to Earth by the end of the decade captured the imagination of millions of people around the world. A group of pioneering Americans recognized the limitless possibilities of this seemingly impossible challenge, and they would risk their lives to make it happen.

Two great Americans we honor today, Lieutenant Commander Roger Chaffee and Lieutenant Colonel Edward White, were among them. More than 30 years ago, these two men, along with their commander, Virgil "Gus" Grissom, were selected for the very first Apollo mission. Tragedy struck before they could achieve their goal. On January 27, 1967, fire swept through the Apollo capsule during a training session, killing all three of them. In 1978 President Carter presented Commander Grissom with one of the first Congressional Space Medals of Honor.

Today I have the privilege of presenting the same medal to his crewmates, Roger Chaffee and Edward White, courageous men who gave their lives in our Nation's effort to conquer the frontiers of space. Even before they joined the Apollo program, Chaffee and White had already served our Nation with great distinction.

Born in Texas and a member of the United States Air Force, Colonel White was the first American to walk in space. At a White House

ceremony soon afterward, President Johnson called him "one of the Christopher Columbuses of our century."

Commander Chaffee was a Michigan native and a decorated Navy pilot. Though he was the rookie of the crew, he didn't lack self-confidence. He once said, "Hell, I'd feel secure taking it up all by myself."

Today we bestow upon Roger Chaffee and Edward White the highest honor in America's space program, but they were honored in our hearts long ago. Their deaths will remind us always that exploring space is dangerous, life-threatening work, work that demands and deserves the bravest and best among us. Though they never got there, astronauts Chaffee, White, and Grissom's footprints are on the Moon. Their presence is felt on every mission of our space shuttle program. Their spirits live on in every successful launch and every safe return. And I'm certain they will be there when the international space station goes into orbit.

America has become the world's leading spacefaring nation because of the selfless pioneering spirits of the men we honor today. I am proud to present these medals to the families of Roger Chaffee and Edward White. On behalf of a grateful Nation, I thank them for their sacrifice.

Now I'd like to ask the military aide to read the citations.

NOTE: The President spoke at 10:37 a.m. in the Oval Office at the White House. In his remarks, he referred to Edward H. White, III, son of Lt. Col. White; Martha Chaffee, widow of Lt. Comdr. Chaffee; and Betty Grissom, widow of Lt. Col. Virgil I. (Gus) Grissom.