

in Cambodia, Nigeria, Congo, Cyprus, the Balkans, everyplace where there are children who deserve a better future waiting to be born.

America will always stand with those who take risks for peace. I salute the NDI for keeping our democratic aspirations in sharp focus. I salute the honorees tonight, those of you whose names were called earlier. You really deserve these awards. I ask you to continue your efforts, to keep your spirits up, to keep your vision high, to remember how we felt when the Good Friday accord was ratified, to remember how you feel on the best days when the worst days come around, and to remember, no matter how tough it gets, it is always better for our children to reach across the lines that divide and build a future that they're all a part of together.

Thank you, and God bless you.

NOTE: The President spoke at 9:48 p.m. in the ballroom of the Shoreham Hotel, at a National Democratic Institute for International Affairs (NDI) dinner. In his remarks, he referred to Paul G. Kirk, Jr., chairman, Kenneth D. Wollack, presi-

dent, and Jean Dunn, vice president for administration and development, NDI; James M. Lyons, Special Adviser to the President for Economic Initiatives for Ireland; former Senator George J. Mitchell, independent chairman of the multiparty talks in Northern Ireland; Special Envoy Richard C. Holbrooke; Sinn Fein leader Gerry Adams; Alliance Party leader Lord John Alderdice; Progressive Unionist Party spokesman David Ervine; Monica McWilliams of the Northern Ireland Women's Coalition; Ulster Democratic Party leader Gary McMichael; Northern Ireland Labour Party leader Malachi Curran; Prime Minister Tony Blair and former Prime Minister John Major of the United Kingdom; Prime Minister Bertie Ahern and former Prime Ministers John Bruton and Albert Reynolds of Ireland; United Kingdom Secretary of State for Northern Ireland Marjorie Mowlam; poet Seamus Heaney; and John de Chastelain, member and chair, Independent International Commission on Decommissioning. The President also referred to former State Department program officer Cecile W. Ledsky, who died December 2.

## Remarks Honoring General Benjamin O. Davis, Jr., of the Tuskegee Airmen

*December 9, 1998*

Thank you. Well, Colonel McGee, I think this is one of those days where I'm supposed to take orders. [*Laughter*] I am delighted to see you. I thank you and Colonel Crockett for the jacket. I can't help saying as a point of personal pride that Colonel Crockett is a citizen of my home State, Arkansas. And we go back a ways, and we were together not all that long ago in Cambridge, England, when we celebrated the 50th anniversary of the D-Day invasion. And we were there together.

Colonel Campbell, I think you were picked to speak not because you were born in Tuskegee but because you give a good speech. [*Laughter*] I think you did a fine job. Thank you, sir.

Let me say to all the Tuskegee Airmen here, we are honored by your presence and grateful for your service. I'd like to ask all the Tuskegee Airmen who are here just to stand for a moment so we can express our appreciation. They are

out in the audience as well as here. Please stand. [*Applause*] Thank you very much.

There are so many distinguished people here in the audience; let me begin by thanking Secretary Cohen for his outstanding leadership. Janet, we're glad to see you here, glad you did that interview with General Davis many years ago. I thank the people from the White House who are here, General Kerrick and others; the people from the Pentagon, Deputy Secretary Hamre, Secretary Caldera, Secretary Danzig, Acting Secretary Peters, General Shelton, all the Joint Chiefs are here today.

I'd like to say a special word of thanks to Senator John McCain, the driving force behind the legislation to authorize this promotion. Thank you, sir.

I also want to thank one of the finest supporters of our military and of this action in the United States Congress, Senator Chuck

Robb, for being here. Thank you, sir—and leaders of the veterans and service organization, members of the Armed Forces. There are many, many distinguished guests here, but I would like to mention two. First, a great American and former Secretary of Transportation, William Coleman, who is here. Thank you for coming, Mr. Secretary Coleman. And I might add, his son has served with great distinction in the Pentagon; we thank him for that.

And I'd like to recognize Governor Doug Wilder from Virginia, who has been very actively involved and wrote an introduction to a book about General Davis. Thank you for being here.

And we want to welcome Mrs. Elnora Davis McLendon and the family and friends of General Davis who are gathered here, and especially General Davis himself.

Much of the distinguished record of General Davis and the Tuskegee Airmen has been mentioned, but I would like, for the record of history, for you to bear with me and allow me to tell this story and the story of this remarkable family.

Today we advance to the rank of four-star general, Benjamin O. Davis, Jr., a hero in war, a leader in peace, a pioneer for freedom, opportunity, and basic human dignity. He earned this honor a long time ago.

Our Armed Forces today are a model for America and for the world of how people of different backgrounds working together for the common good can perform at a far more outstanding level than they ever could have divided. Perhaps no one is more responsible for that achievement than the person we honor today. When the doors were shut on him, he knocked again and again until finally they opened, until his sheer excellence and determination made it impossible to keep them closed. Once the doors were open, he made sure they stayed open for others to follow. Some who followed are in this audience today.

In 1899 General Davis' father, Benjamin Davis, Sr., a skilled National Guardsman, sought entry into West Point. He was told no blacks would be appointed. Undeterred, he enlisted in the Army and distinguished himself immediately. In less than 2 years, he was an officer. It takes longer if you go to West Point. *[Laughter]*

Twenty years later, Colonel Davis was teaching at the Tuskegee Institute. The Klu Klux Klan announced it would march through the Daveses' neighborhood. The Institute instructed

its staff to stay indoors, turn out their lights, to keep from provoking the marchers. But Colonel Davis refused. Instead, he put on his dress uniform, turned on the porch light, gathered his family. Theirs was the only light for miles. But they sat proudly and bravely outside as the hate marchers passed by. Benjamin Davis, Jr., never forgot about his father's shining porch light.

As a teenager, inspired by Charles Lindbergh's historic flight, he dreamed of becoming an aviator and a trailblazer. With hard work, he did gain admission to West Point, the very opportunity denied his father. The father saw that the son had the chance not only to serve his country but to inspire African-Americans all across America. "Remember," he wrote, "12 million people will be pulling for you with all we have."

But at West Point, as you have already heard today, Benjamin Davis was quite alone. For 4 years, fellow cadets refused to speak to him, hoping to drive him out. "What they didn't realize," he later recalled, "was that I was stubborn enough to put up with the treatment to reach the goal I had come to attain."

His request to join the Air Corps upon graduation was denied, because no units accepted blacks. Though he ranked 35th out of a class of 276, West Point's Superintendent advised him to pursue a career outside the Army. He refused. Arriving at Fort Benning to command an infantry company, he was again shunned from the Officers' Club, subject to segregation on and off the base.

But times were changing as World War II dawned. Just as President Roosevelt promoted Benjamin Davis, Sr., to Brigadier General, the first African-American general in our Nation's history, he ordered the Air Corps to create a black flying group. Benjamin Davis was named its leader, and in the spring of 1943, the 99th Fighter Squadron departed for North Africa and began combat missions. Their group commander soon recommended they be removed from combat, however, claiming—listen to this—that a black American did not have the desire or the proper reflexes to make a first-class fighter pilot.

Colonel Davis then proved he was just as skilled in the conference room as in the cockpit. His testimony, as you have so eloquently heard today, carried the day before a military panel, making the case for ability and bravery. The panel recommended that the 99th be reinstated

and that more African-American squadrons be sent overseas.

Returned to the skies, as we all know, the Tuskegee Airmen proved themselves again and again. They destroyed far more planes than they lost; they disabled hundreds of enemy boxcars. They even sank an enemy destroyer, a unique achievement in the war. And as you have heard twice now, during 200 escort missions above the Third Reich, they never lost a single bomber to enemy fire.

The Tuskegee Airmen's extraordinary success and the invaluable contributions of other blacks and minorities in the war helped to turn the tide against official racism and to pave the way for President Truman's historic order 50 years ago mandating, and I quote, "equality of treatment and opportunity in the armed services." This led to an end of segregation in our forces.

For 25 years after the war, Benjamin Davis, Jr., rose to complex security challenges in Air Force postings at home and abroad. Wherever he went, he overcame bigotry through professionalism and performance. Following his retirement in 1970, he continued his distinguished public service, including at senior positions at the Department of Transportation.

I'd like to say something personal. A lot of these old-fashioned, almost amazing arguments against the capacity of black Americans were still very much in vogue during the civil rights movement in the 1950's and the 1960's. And for children like me who were taught that the civil rights movement was the right thing to do in the South, and who engaged in countless arguments against inane statements, you have to remember, we were raised in the generation right after World War II, and everyone recognized that everything about World War II in our minds was ideal and perfect and insurmountable and unsurpassable. The one stopper that any southerner had in a civil rights argument was the Tuskegee Airmen. They will never know how much it meant to us.

General Davis, through it all you have had the steadfast support of your wife, Agatha, whom I know is home today thinking of you. You struggled and succeeded together. I think you all should know that in 1973, Mrs. Davis wrote to a cadet who had been silenced by his classmates: "I think I know what your life at the Academy must have been. My best friend spent 4 years of silence at the Point. From 1936, when I married that best friend of mine, until

1949, I, too, was silenced by his classmates and their wives. There will always be those who will stand in your way. Don't resent them. Just feel sorry for them, and hold your head high."

Like so many military spouses past and present, this exceptional woman, an officer's wife who spent World War II toiling in a munitions factory, has worked and sacrificed to defend our freedom. And General, just as we salute you today, we salute her as well.

When Benjamin O. Davis, Jr., became an officer, he was the only black officer in our Air Corps. Now the Air Force has 4,000. Minorities and women remain underrepresented in our officer corps, but General Davis is here today as living proof that a person can overcome adversity and discrimination, achieve great things, turn skeptics into believers, and through example and perseverance, one person can bring truly extraordinary change.

So often today, America faces the challenge of helping to prevent conflicts overseas, fueled by these very divisions of race and ethnicity and religious differences. On Saturday I am going on a mission of peace to the Middle East, still embroiled in such conflicts. We cannot meet these challenges abroad unless we have healed our divisions at home.

To all of us, General Davis, you are the very embodiment of the principle that from diversity we can build an even stronger unity and that in diversity we can find the strength to prevail and advance. If we follow your example, America will always be strong, growing stronger. We will always be a leader for democracy, opportunity, and peace. We will be able to fulfill the promise of our Founders, to be a nation of equal rights and dignity for all, whose citizens pledge to each other our lives, our fortune, our sacred honor, in pursuit of that more perfect Union.

I am very, very proud, General Davis, of your service. On behalf of all Americans, I thank you. I thank you for everything you have done, for everything you have been, for what you have permitted the rest of us Americans to become.

Now I would like to ask the military aide to read the citation, after which, I invite General Davis' sister, Mrs. Elnora Davis McLendon, to join me in pinning on the General's fourth star.

Read the citation.

NOTE: The President spoke at 2:49 p.m. in Room 450 of the Old Executive Office Building. In his

*Dec. 9 / Administration of William J. Clinton, 1998*

remarks, he referred to original Tuskegee Airmen Col. Charles McGee, USAF (Ret.), Lt. Col. Woodrow Crockett, USAF (Ret.), and Col. William A. Campbell, USAF (Ret.); Janet Langhart, wife of Defense Secretary William S. Cohen;

former Secretary of Transportation William T. Coleman, Jr., and his son, William T. Coleman III, General Counsel, U.S. Army; and former Gov. Doug Wilder of Virginia.

## Remarks on Lighting the National Christmas Tree *December 9, 1997*

Thank you very much. Thank you, John. I want to thank you and all the people responsible, again, for this wonderful, wonderful evening. I'd like to thank our performers: Tony Bennett, Leona Mitchell, Jose Feliciano, the "Cats" crew, the Paul Hill choir, Al Roker, who has been a great Santa Claus tonight. I'd like to thank our Brownie and Cub Scout, Jessica Scott and Edgar Allen Sheppard. And of course, I'd like to thank Sammy Sosa and Mrs. Sosa for joining us tonight. We're delighted to see them all.

Hillary and I look forward to this every year, and this, as you may know, is the 75th anniversary of this Christmas tree lighting. For us, Christmas always starts with this Pageant of Peace. Tonight we celebrate the beginning of this season of peace and hope, of sharing and giving, of family and friends. We celebrate the birth of the child we know as the Prince of Peace, who came into the world with only a stable's roof to shelter him but grew to teach a lesson of love that has lasted two millennia. "Blessed are the peacemakers," he said, and his words still call us to action.

The lights we illuminate tonight are more than the flickering bulbs on a beautiful Colorado blue spruce. They represent millions of individual acts of courage and compassion that light our lives. Like the Star of Bethlehem, these lights shine the promise of hope and renewal.

Like the candles of Hanukkah, they stand for freedom against tyranny. Like the lamps that will soon light the mosques in the coming months of Ramadan, they evoke a call to community.

We light this tree in Washington, but all over the world we thank God that the light of peace is glowing as never before in Northern Ireland, in Bosnia, in the Middle East. In the coming year, let us rededicate ourselves to building the bonds of peace on Earth. Let those of us who are Americans express our appreciation to those who serve us in uniform, represented tonight by the United States Air Force Band, who help to preserve peace for us.

Now I'd like to ask Sammy and Jessica and Edgar to come up here and join me as we light the Christmas tree, our national tree. Let the spirit of the holidays, of peace and good will, be our beacon all year long. Merry Christmas. Happy New Year. May God bless you all.

Now put your hands on the switch, and I'll count down to one. Three, two, one. Light the tree!

NOTE: The President spoke at 5:50 p.m. on the Ellipse during the annual Christmas Pageant of Peace. In his remarks, he referred to John J. Betchkal, president, Christmas Pageant of Peace; and baseball player Sammy Sosa, National League Most Valuable Player, and his wife, Sonia.

## Message on the Observance of Hanukkah, 1998 *December 9, 1998*

Warm greetings to all those celebrating Hanukkah.

For eight consecutive nights during this twilight of the year, in Jewish homes across America and around the world, the flames of the