

Remarks Honoring Rosa Parks at the Congressional Gold Medal Award Ceremony June 15, 1999

Thank you so much. Mr. Speaker, Mr. Gephardt, Senator Daschle, Representative Carson, Senator Abraham, Representative Clyburn, Representative Watts, to all the Members of the House and the Senate here, and those not here, who supported this resolution, I thank you for what you have done. Dr. Ogilvie, Dr. Ford, Reverend Jackson, members of the Cabinet and the civil rights community who are here, Dr. Height.

I'd like to say a special word of welcome to two members of the Little Rock Nine who came here to honor Rosa Parks: Minnijean Brown Trickey and Robert Jefferson, welcome to you. I want to thank the Howard University Gospel Choir and the incomparable Jessye Norman for their wonderful, wonderful music.

The previous speakers have spoken with great power, eloquence, and truth. In less than 200 days now, we will mark the end of another century. They have told you the story of one brave woman and the ripples of impact she had upon all the millions of people who lived in the United States. It is, in many ways, the quintessential story of the 20th century, a time with trials and tribulations which still, fundamentally, is the story of the triumph of freedom, of democracy over dictatorship, free enterprise over state socialism, of tolerance over bigotry.

It was a fight waged on the beaches of Normandy, on the islands of the South Pacific, at Checkpoint Charlie, behind the Iron Curtain, and countless known and unknown, large and small villages across the globe; here, at home, a fight waged in classrooms, lunch counters, and on public buses in the segregated South. For us, what has always been at stake is whether we could keep moving on that stony road, closer to the ideals of our Founders, whether we really could be a country where we are all equal, not only endowed by our Creator with, but in fact living with, the rights to life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness.

Forty-four years ago Rosa Parks reminded us all that we were a long way from those ideals, that for millions of Americans, our history was full of weary years, our sweet land of liberty bearing only bitter fruit and silent tears. And so she sat, anchored to that seat, as Dr. King

said, "by the accumulated indignities of days gone by and the countless aspirations of generations yet unborn."

Rosa Parks said, "I didn't get on that bus to get arrested. I got on that bus to go home." [Laughter] In so many ways, Rosa Parks brought America home to our Founders' dream.

You know, when we look across the history of the civil rights movement, we celebrate President Lincoln and the Congress of that era—for Constitutional amendments. We celebrate William Lloyd Garrison and Frederick Douglass. In our own period, we celebrate President Eisenhower and sending the troops to Little Rock, the commitment of John and Robert Kennedy, the magnificent legislative achievements of President Johnson and that Congress, reaching across party lines.

But we know that in a funny way, people who have no position or money and have only the power of their courage and character are always there before the political leaders. We know that.

When Rosa Parks got on that bus in Alabama, I was a 9-year-old boy, living in Arkansas, going to segregated schools, riding public buses every single day, where all the colored people sat in the back. My family got a television when I was 9 years old, just a few months before it became worldwide news that Mrs. Parks had gotten on the bus. I thought it was a pretty good deal and so did my friends. And we couldn't figure out anything we could do, since we couldn't even vote. So, we began to sit on the back of the bus when we got on. [Laughter]

It seems like—I say this—now, this is a little thing. I say it only to say we must never, ever, when this ceremony is over, forget about the power of ordinary people to stand in the fire for the cause of human dignity and to touch the hearts of people that have almost turned to stone.

I thank the Congress for honoring Rosa Parks. I was honored, Rosa, to give you the Medal of Freedom, and I was thrilled during the State of the Union Address when you got that enormous bipartisan ovation here. But remember, my fellow Americans, freedom's work is never

done. There are still people who are discriminated against. There are still people—there are still people that because of their human condition are looked down on, derided, degraded, demeaned. And we should all remember the powerful example of this one citizen. And those of us with greater authority and power should attempt every day, in every way, to follow her lead.

God bless you, Mrs. Parks, and God bless America.

Now—[*applause*]*—thank you. Now, I would like to—again, this is my errand for Congresswoman Carson and Senator Abraham and the Speaker and Mr. Gephardt and the other leaders here. I understand the actual medal has not been struck yet, but a “gold line” copy of the resolution that authorizes the medal has been struck, or prepared, for Mrs. Parks. And I’d like to ask all of you to look to my left, to your right, for a glimpse of the proposed design for the medal.*

Could we—Julia, why don’t you go down there, and you and Spence can—[*laughter*]*—wow, it’s beautiful. Really beautiful, isn’t it? Let’s give a big hand to Artis Lane, who was the artist who prepared this. Didn’t she do a wonderful job? [Applause]*

NOTE: The President spoke at 4:10 p.m. in the rotunda at the U.S. Capitol. In his remarks, he referred to Representative Julia Carson and Senator Spencer Abraham, sponsors of the legislation to authorize award of the medal, Public Law 106–26; Lloyd J. Ogilvie, Chaplain of the Senate; James David Ford, Chaplain of the House; civil rights leader Rev. Jesse Jackson; Dorothy Height, chairman of the board, National Council of Negro Women; Minnijean Brown Trickey and Jefferson Thomas, members of the Little Rock Nine, students who integrated Central High School in Little Rock, AR, in 1957; soprano Jessye Norman; and artist Artis Lane, who submitted the design for the medal.

Remarks on Proposed Work Incentives Legislation

June 15, 1999

That was a speech of a man who is not running for reelection. [*Laughter*] Since I’m not either, I can only hope to do as well. [*Laughter*]

I would like to point out something, since we are here in the LBJ Room, named for President Johnson, a room in which he worked for many good causes as Senate majority leader. Thirty-five years ago he said, “I am convinced that it is morally right, that it is socially just, that it is economically sensible, that it is administratively feasible to open the door of employment opportunity to Americans with disabilities.”

Now, our country has done a lot on that road in the last 35 years, especially beginning with the Americans with Disabilities Act. In 1997 we dramatically strengthened the IDEA Act, and I’m very proud to have been a part of that with the people who are here. But the full promise of the Americans with Disabilities Act will never be realized until we pass this legislation.

I am profoundly indebted to all these Senators who are here, Senators Lott and Moynihan and, of course, to Senators Jeffords and Ken-

nedy, but let me—I know most of you here understand this, but let me just give you one specific example. I think it’s important to humanize this.

I had a town meeting about this issue in New Hampshire on February the 18th. And there was a man there who had been very badly injured in a skiing accident and was paralyzed, basically, from the chest down. And because of the special opportunity he had, he actually was able to keep his health care and work. His health insurance—his health care costs were \$40,000 a year, just to maintain him. But he worked very productively and very successfully for about 75 percent of that; that was his salary. Now, if he were not working, he’d still get the \$40,000 in health care, but he wouldn’t be working. He’d be much less happy, much less fulfilled. He wouldn’t be paying income taxes to the Federal Government. He wouldn’t be paying the other revenues through which we fund Medicare and Social Security, including, interestingly enough, the money from Social Security that goes to the disabled.