

Remarks on Presenting Congressional Gold Medals to the Little Rock Nine November 9, 1999

The President. Thank you very much. Thank you, Mr. Speaker, Senator Daschle, Leader Gephardt, Senator Hutchison, Senator Lincoln, Members of Congress, Secretary Riley, and members of the Cabinet and administration; a special word of thanks to Congressman Thompson and to my good friend Senator Bumpers.

The great privilege of speaking last is that you get the last word. *[Laughter]* The great burden is that everything that needs to be said has been said. *[Laughter]*

I would like to begin by introducing some people who have not yet been introduced but whose presence here is altogether fitting. The story of the Little Rock Nine, in the end, is the story of the triumph of the rule of law and the American Constitution which was given expression not only by a decision of the United States Supreme Court but by a decision of a President determined to enforce the rule of law.

A couple of hours ago I had the great honor of signing legislation naming the Old Executive Office Building the Dwight D. Eisenhower Executive Office Building. President Eisenhower's son, daughter-in-law, and granddaughter are here, and I would like to ask General John Eisenhower, Joanne, and Susan to stand and be recognized and thank them for their presence here. *[Applause]*

I want to thank all the previous speakers for their very moving words. This is a special day for me, a happy day and a sad day, an emotional day. I thank all of you for what you said about Daisy Bates who, in my years of service in Arkansas, became a good friend to Hillary and to me. I was privileged to go to the Civil Rights Museum in Memphis, which is built around the Lorraine Motel, when we dedicated the exhibit on Central High School, with the statue of Governor Faubus on one side and Daisy on the other. *[Laughter]* And even though by then she had to get around in a wheelchair, she got a big laugh out of that. *[Laughter]* And what a wonderful laugh she had.

So I ask you all to remember her today, her smiling self, for that gave a lot of confidence to those whom we honor. Secretary Slater is representing the administration at her funeral

today, and I thank him for that, because he would dearly love to be here with his friends.

I think it was Senator Hutchison who first mentioned that we are celebrating the 10th anniversary of the Berlin Wall's fall today, and it is fitting that we, on this same day, recognize what these people did to make the walls of bigotry and prejudice fall in America. For when they marched up the steps to school, a simple act, they became foot soldiers for freedom, carrying America to higher ground.

You know, when Little Rock happened, I was 11 years old, living 50 miles away. Like every schoolchild in Arkansas, except those in Charleston—all six of them—*[laughter]*—I was—how I miss you. I miss doing this. *[Laughter]* When Little Rock happened, all the kids in Arkansas, white and black, we all went to segregated schools, with very few exceptions. And these people, they just burst in on our lives. And I feel like I've been walking along with them for 42 years now, because they forced everybody to think, you know? Before then, oh, why, you know, I was 11 years old, and my grandparents believed in school integration, and they taught me about that, and I thought it was a great thing.

But the truth is nobody really thought about it very much because segregation was a way of life, and most people just got up and went through their lives, and nobody questioned it. Nobody challenged it. It was just the way things were. It was unfortunate, but that's the way things were.

And all of a sudden, they showed up, and it wasn't the way things were anymore. And then everyone had to decide, everyone, everyone in everybody's little life. You had to decide: Where do you stand on this; what do you believe; how are we going to live? So these people, when they were young, they changed the way we were.

I would like to say to all of you that they paid a price for doing that. And they look real fine sitting up here today, and they have this vast array of family and supporters here, and they have lived good lives and accomplished remarkable things. But we're giving them this medal because they paid the price.

Daisy said what they endured was a volcano of hatred. And like Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego, they walked out without being burned. But they have their scars. They taught us that you can turn your cheek from violence without averting your eyes to injustice, and they taught us that they could pay their price and go on.

On this journey that started 42 years ago, I could never have known that life would bring us in contact. But 12 years ago, on the 30th anniversary of the Central High incident, I invited them all to come to the Governor's Mansion, and I showed them around in the rooms where Governor Faubus plotted all the stratagems to keep them out of school. [Laughter] They got a kick out of that, and so did I. Ten years later, as President, I had the profound honor of going to Central High School to hold the doors open for them as they walked in, without incident. And it was great.

That school now has a very diverse student body, and a faculty, one of the best records of academic excellence in our home State. It had then an African-American student body president, which it frequently does, and in all the years I was Governor, it was the only high school in my State and one of the few in the country where you could still study Greek.

Now, we open the doors of this house. And I want to say a special word of thanks to the Speaker and the other congressional leaders for allowing us to make this presentation—let's not forget, this is the Congressional Gold Medal—which the President always participates in, but usually we do it in their House, now on Pennsylvania Avenue. But because of our relationship, the Speaker and the other leaders have agreed for us to come here. And I thank them for that, for personal reasons, for our friends.

Today we celebrate the faiths of our Founders, the faith of parents in their children, the faith of children in their future. We celebrate it because we can, and we can because these nine people helped us to keep it alive and to redeem it. And now, as others have said, it is for us to take that faith into a new millennium, once again to redeem the promise of our country by giving all of our children a world-class education and all of our people a chance to be part of our prosperity and by giving all of our increasingly diverse citizens a chance to be a part of one America.

So in addition to giving them a medal, we ought to make that commitment, for like all people, we—and I certainly include myself in this—we all find it easy to condemn yesterday's wrongdoing. But these people stood up as children to condemn today's. And so let us learn from them and honor their example.

The Speaker joined me in Chicago the other day, in the common cause of giving economic opportunity to those who haven't had it in this most remarkable of economic recoveries. Many of you have committed yourselves to opening the doors of quality education to all of our children.

But the most important thing we have to do is to truly build one America in the 21st century. I want to read you something that Melba Pattillo Beals put in her book. "If my Central High experience taught me one lesson," she wrote, "it is that we are not separate. The effort to separate ourselves, whether by race, creed, color, religion, or status, is as costly to the separator as to those who would be separated. The task that remains is to see ourselves reflected in every other human being and to respect and honor our differences."

A couple of months ago in this very room—or a couple of weeks ago, actually—Hillary hosted one of our Nation's top scientists and one of the founders of the Internet. And they discussed the remarkable convergence of the explosion in computer advances with the unlocking of the mysteries of the human gene and the gene structure, the so-called genome.

And the scientist said that if you put all the people together, and you had a genetic map of every individual on Earth, you would find that we are 99.9 percent the same genetically. Then, even more surprising perhaps, the scientist said, if you took a representative group of people of different races—if you took 100 African-Americans and 100 Chinese-Americans and 100 Hispanic-Americans and 100 Irish-Americans—and you put them in these little groups, you would find that the genetic differences within each group, from individual to individual, are greater than the genetic differences of one group to another. Now, Melba knew that before the scientists found it out. [Laughter]

I say that to make this point: Every one of us, in some way or another, almost every day, is guilty in some way, large or small, of forgetting that we are 99.9 percent the same. Every

person, every family, every group, every nation is guilty from time to time of trying to give meaning to life by denigrating someone else who is different in some way. Honest and real differences can only be explored, confronted, and worked through, and diversity can only be celebrated when we recognize that the most important fact of life is our common humanity. They all knew that in some instinctive way.

The truth is almost all children know that. They have to be taught differently. Because so many were taught differently, it fell to these nine Americans when they were young, as children, to become our teachers. And because they taught us well, we are a better country. And we honor them today, but let us not forget to heed their lessons.

The Book of Job says, "My foot has held fast. I have not turned aside. And when tried, I shall come forth as gold." For holding fast to their steps, for not turning aside, we now ask these nine humble children, grown into strong adults, to come forth for their gold.

Major, please read the resolution.

[At this point, Maj. William Mullen III, USMC, Marine Corps Aide to the President, read the citations, and the President presented the medals.]

The President. Now we have a special treat to cap off this event. But before I introduce the final presenter, I want to say again how much I appreciate the very large delegation

from Congress from both parties who are here and particularly the fact that every Representative from our home State is here, Representative Hutchinson, Representative Dickey, Representative Berry, and Congressman Vic Snyder, the Congressman from Central High School. Thank you all for being here.

And I want to thank the really large number of people from our home State, from Arkansas, who are here, many who live in Washington, many who have come up here from Arkansas to be here, and thank all of you for coming.

And now I would like to ask Reverend Wintley Phipps to come forward to sing us on our way, a great gift to America. And thank you for sharing your time and your gift with us. God bless you, sir.

Thank you.

NOTE: The President spoke at 3:55 p.m. in the East Room at the White House. In his remarks, he referred to gospel singer Rev. Wintley Phipps; the late Daisy Bates, civil rights activist; Vinton G. Cerf, senior vice president of Internet architecture and technology, MCI WorldCom; and Eric Lander, director, Whitehead Institute/MIT Center for Genome Research. The Congressional Gold Medals were presented to Ernest Green, Elizabeth Eckford, Jefferson Thomas, Dr. Terrence Roberts, Carlotta Walls Lanier, Minnijean Brown Trickey, Gloria Ray Karlmark, Thelma Mothershed-Wair, and Melba Pattillo Beals, collectively known as the Little Rock Nine.

Statement on Proposed Minimum Wage Legislation November 9, 1999

The Senate Republican leadership made a serious mistake by insisting on using a minimum wage increase as a cynical tool to advance special interest tax breaks that aren't paid for and do little to help working families. I cannot let this bill become law in its current form. I once again call on Congress to give working American

families the pay raise they deserve. Congress should pass clean legislation that boosts the minimum wage by one dollar over the next 2 years and simply restores the value of the minimum wage to what it was in 1982. American workers deserve no less.