

Today I'm asking Secretary Shalala to instruct FDA and NIH to accelerate their review of gene therapy guidelines and regulations. I want to know how we can better ensure that this information about the trials is shared with the public. I want to know whether we need to strengthen requirements on informed consent. If we don't have full confidence in these trials, people won't participate, and then the true promise of genetic medicine will be put on hold. We cannot allow our remarkable progress in genomic research to be undermined by concerns over the privacy of genetic data or the safety of gene therapies. Instead, we must do whatever it takes to address these legitimate concerns. We know if we do, the positive possibilities are absolutely endless.

I said this the other day, but I would like to reiterate—I think maybe I am so excited about this because of my age. I was in the generation of children who were the first treated with the polio vaccine. And for those of you who are much younger than me, you can't imagine what it was like, for our parents to see that—the literal terror in our parents' eyes when we were children, paralyzed with fear that somehow we would be afflicted by what was then called infantile paralysis; and the sense of hope, the eagerness, the sort of nail-biting anticipation when we learned of the Salk vaccine and all of us were lined up to get our shots. Unless you were in our generation, you cannot imagine. And the thought that every other problem that could affect the generation of my grandchildren could be visited with that level of relief and

hope and exhilaration by the parents of our children's generation is something that is almost inexpressible.

We have to make the most of this. And we know, we have learned from over 200 years of experience as a nation, knocking down physical and intellectual frontiers, that we can only spread the benefits of new discoveries when we proceed in a manner that is consistent with our most ancient and cherished values. That is what this day is all about. So to all of you who have contributed to it, I thank you very, very much.

Now I would like to ask the Members of Congress who are here and members of the administration who are here who have been involved in this to come up with me. And all I have to do is write my name. *[Laughter]* That's a pretty good deal. You can write the human genome code, and I'll write my name—*[laughter]*—and that takes full account of the one-tenth of one percent difference in our genetic makeup. *[Laughter]*

Thank you very much.

NOTE: The President spoke at 12:40 p.m. in the auditorium at the American Association for the Advancement of Science (AAAS). In his remarks, he referred to Shirley Malcolm, head of the directorate for education and human resources programs, and Richard S. Nicholson, member, board of directors, and executive officer, AAAS; and Francis S. Collins, Director, National Human Genome Research Institute, National Institutes of Health. The Executive order is listed in Appendix D at the end of this volume.

Remarks on Presenting the Congressional Medal of Honor to Alfred Rascon

February 8, 2000

The President. Colonel, thank you for that prayer. General Hicks, Secretary Cohen, Secretary West, Secretary Richardson, Secretary Caldera, General Shelton, General Ralston, members of the Joint Chiefs, all the Members of Congress who are here—and we have quite a distinguished array of them. We thank them all for coming. I'd like to ask the Members of Congress who are here to stand so you'll

see how many we have. We're very grateful to you for your presence here. Thank you.

When the Medal of Honor was conceived in 1861, some Americans actually worried that it might be a bad thing, that the medals would be seen as somehow too aristocratic, and that there was no need for them in a genuinely democratic society. Today we award the Medal of Honor secure in the knowledge that people like Alfred Rascon have kept our democracy

alive all these years. We bestow the medal knowing that America would not have survived were it not for people like him, who, generation after generation, have always renewed the extraordinary gift of freedom for their fellow citizens.

Under any circumstances, a Medal of Honor ceremony is an event of great importance. Today it is especially so: for the rare quality of heroism on display that long-ago day in 1966; for the long, patient wait for recognition; for Alfred's decision to devote his life both before and after 1966 to a nation he was not born in.

Alfred Rascon was born in Mexico on September 10, 1945, just 8 days after the formal surrender ending World War II. When he was very young, his parents came to America for a better chance. They ended up in Oxnard, north of Los Angeles. And when Alfred started grade school, he still spoke not a word of English. He grew up near three military bases and fell in love with the Armed Forces. At the advanced age of 7, wanting to do his part to defend America, he built a homemade parachute and jumped off the roof of his house. [Laughter] Unfortunately, in his own words, the chute had a "total malfunction"—[laughter]—and he broke his wrist.

But as usual, he was undeterred. Soon he graduated from high school and enlisted in the United States Army. Appropriately, he became a medic for a platoon of paratroopers, the first of the 503d Airborne Battalion of the 173d Airborne Brigade. He explained, "I wanted to give back something to this country and its citizens for the opportunities it had given me and my parents. Those paratroopers who served with me in the reconnaissance platoon knew nothing of my immigrant status. It was never an issue. They simply knew me as Doc."

Alfred's platoon was sent to Vietnam in May of 1965, part of the first Army combat unit there. On March 16th, 1966, they were in Long Khanh Province, helping another platoon that was pinned down by the enemy. In his words, it was "10 minutes of pure hell."

In the middle of an intense firefight, Alfred was everywhere. While attending to a fatally wounded machine gunner, Private William Thompson, he was hit with shrapnel and shot in the hip. The bullet went parallel to his spine and came out by his shoulder. Ignoring his own wounds, he then brought desperately needed ammo to another machine gunner, Private Larry

Gibson. Several grenades then landed nearby. One of them ripped his mouth open. When he saw another land near Private Neil Haffey, he covered him with his body, absorbing the brunt of the blast. Yet another grenade landed near Sergeant Ray Compton, and Alfred covered him, too. Then, barely able to walk, bleeding from his ears and nose, he ran to recover a machine gun that the enemy was about to capture. The extra firepower kept the enemy from advancing, and Alfred Rascon saved his platoon.

Through this extraordinary succession of courageous acts, he never gave a single thought to himself, except, he admits, for the instant when the grenade exploded near his face and he thought, "Oh, God, my good looks are gone." [Laughter] I'm not much of an expert, but I would say you were wrong about that, Captain. [Laughter] You look just fine here today.

On that distant day, in that faraway place, this man gave everything he had, utterly and selflessly, to protect his platoon mates and the Nation he was still not yet a citizen of. Later he said with characteristic modesty, "I did it because I had to do it, and that's all there is to it." He said, "I don't consider myself a hero. Anybody in combat would do the same thing for their buddies and friends. We were all colorblind. We were all different nationalities. The important thing is that we were Americans fighting for America."

I want to stop just for a moment to salute all the other Americans who did that in Vietnam. We want to honor you today, along with Alfred. Many of you were there with him. And I'd like for all of you to stand or, if you can't stand, lift your arms and be recognized. We want to acknowledge you today, please. [Applause]

Alfred Rascon was so badly wounded that day he was actually given last rites. After a long convalescence, he pulled through, and he continued to serve his country. He became a citizen in 1967. He rejoined the Army as an officer. In 1972 he volunteered for a second tour in Vietnam. And in 1983 he began working for the Justice Department. Today, he is the Inspector General of the Selective Service System, helping to make sure that others will be there to defend America as he did.

Looking at his lifetime of service to our Nation, it would be hard to imagine a better definition of citizenship. So I would like to also take a moment, sir, to thank your parents, Alfredo

and Andrea, for teaching their son the values of good citizenship. And we would all like to welcome your wife, Carol, and your children, Amanda and Alan. They must be so very proud of you today. We welcome you here.

Now, here's the story of how we all came here. Alfred Rascon was given a Silver Star for his valor that day in 1966, but the request for his Medal of Honor somehow got lost in a thick-et of redtape. His platoon mates persisted, showing as much loyalty to him as he had shown to them. Thanks to them, after 34 years, I am proud to present you with our Nation's highest honor.

Since the creation of the Medal of Honor, roughly one in five of them have been awarded to immigrants. Today, there are over 60,000 immigrants protecting the United States in our military.

Alfred was once asked why he volunteered to join and to go to Vietnam when he was not even a citizen. And he said, "I was always an American in my heart."

Alfred Rascon, today we honor you, as you have honored us by your choice to become an American and your courage in reflecting the best of America. You said that you summoned your courage for your platoon because "you've got to take care of your people." That's a pretty good credo for all the rest of us, as well.

On behalf of all Americans, and especially on behalf of your platoon members who are here today, I thank you for what you mean to our country. Thank you for what you gave that day and what you have given every day since. Thank you for reminding us that being

American has nothing to do with the place of your birth, the color of your skin, the language of your parents, or the way you worship God. Thank you for living the enduring American values every day. Thank you for doing something that was hard because no one else was there to do it. Thank you for looking out for people when no one else could be there for them.

You have taught us once again that being American has nothing to do with the place of birth, racial, ethnic origin, or religious faith. It comes straight from the heart. And your heart, sir, is an extraordinary gift to your country.

Commander, please read the citation.

[At this point, Comdr. Michael M. Gilday, USN, Navy Aide to the President, read the citation, and the President presented the medal. Mr. Rascon then made brief remarks.]

The President. I want to thank you all again for being here today and invite you to join our honoree and his family in a reception in the State Dining Room at the end of the hall. Thank you very much, and welcome. But don't leave until we have the benediction. [Laughter]

General Hicks.

NOTE: The President spoke at 2:35 p.m. in the East Room at the White House. In his remarks, he referred to Lt. Col. Frank Vavrin, USA (Ret.), Chaplain Corps, 503d Airborne Battalion, who gave the invocation; and Brig. Gen. David Hicks, USA, Deputy Chief of Chaplains. The transcript released by the Office of the Press Secretary also included the remarks of Mr. Rascon.

Statement on the Election of Stipe Mesic as President of Croatia February 8, 2000

I congratulate President-elect Stipe Mesic on his victory in Monday's elections in Croatia. Mr. Mesic's victory is a turning point for Croatia. It brings with it the promise of genuine democracy and a normal life for Croatia's people, stronger ties between our two nations, and greater stability throughout southeast Europe. The people of Croatia have clearly demonstrated their desire to see their country take its rightful place in Europe. The United States will do everything it can to help them reach their destina-

tion. And together we will send a clear message to all the people of the Balkans that a brighter future is within their grasp.

I look forward to working closely with President-elect Mesic, Prime Minister Racan, and the new government in Zagreb.

NOTE: The statement referred to Prime Minister Ivica Racan of Croatia.