

Remarks on Presenting the Congressional Gold Medal to Navajo
Code Talkers
July 26, 2001

Thank you very much. Today America honors 29 Native Americans who, in a desperate hour, gave their country a service only they could give. In war, using their native language, they relayed secret messages that turned the course of battle. At home, they carried for decades the secret of their own heroism. Today we give these exceptional marines the recognition they earned so long ago.

I want to thank the Congress for inviting me here, Mr. Speaker. I want to thank Senators Campbell, Bingaman, and Johnson and Congressman Udall for their leadership. I want to thank Sergeant Major McMichael—distinguished guests, ladies and gentlemen, welcome to Washington, DC.

The gentlemen with us, John Brown, Chester Nez, Lloyd Oliver, Allen Dale June, and Joe Palmer, represented by his son Kermit, are the last of the original Navajo Code Talkers. In presenting gold medals to each of them, the Congress recognizes their individual service, bravely offered and flawlessly performed.

With silver medals, we also honor the dozens more who served later with the same courage and distinction. And with all these honors, America pays tribute to the tradition and community that produced such men, the great Navajo Nation.

The paintings in this rotunda tell of America and its rise as a nation. Among them are images of the first Europeans to reach the coast and the first explorer to come upon the Mississippi. But before all these firsts on this continent, there were the first people. They are depicted in the background as if extras in the story. Yet, their own presence here in America predates all human record. Before others arrived, the story was theirs alone.

Today we mark a moment of shared history and shared victory. We recall a story that all Americans can celebrate and every American should know. It is a story of ancient people called to serve in a modern war. It is a story of one unbreakable oral code of the Second World War, messages traveling by field radio on Iwo Jima in the very language heard across the Colorado plateau centuries ago.

Above all, it's a story of young Navajos who brought honor to their nation and victory to their country. Some of the Code Talkers were very young, like Albert Smith, who joined the Marines at 15. In order to enlist, he said, "I had to advance my age a little bit." At least one Code Talker was overage, so he claimed to be younger in order to serve. On active duty, their value was so great and their order so sensitive that they were closely guarded. By war's end, some 400 Navajos had served as Code Talkers; 13 were killed in action, and their names, too, are on today's roll of honor.

Regardless of circumstances, regardless of history, they came forward to serve America. The Navajo code itself provides a part of the reason. Late in his life, Albert Smith explained, "The code word for America was 'Our Mother.' 'Our Mother' stood for freedom, our religion, our ways of life, and that's why we went in."

The Code Talkers joined 44,000 Native Americans who wore the uniform in World War II. More than 12,000 Native Americans fought in World War I. Thousands more served in Korea, Vietnam, and serve to this very day. Twenty-four Native Americans have earned the highest military distinction of all, the Medal of Honor, including Ernest Childers, who was my guest at the White House last week. In all these wars and conflicts, Native Americans have

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served with the modesty and strength and quiet valor their tradition has always inspired.

That tradition found full expression in the Code Talkers—in those absent and in those with us today. Gentlemen, your service inspires the respect and admiration of all Americans, and our gratitude is ex-

pressed for all time in the medals it is now my honor to present.

May God bless you all.

NOTE: The President spoke at 1:41 p.m. in the rotunda at the U.S. Capitol. In his remarks, he referred to Sgt. Maj. Alford McMichael, USMC, who represented the U.S. Marine Corps.

Statement on the Anniversary of the Americans with Disabilities Act of 1990

July 26, 2001

Eleven years ago today, people from across America gathered to celebrate the signing of the Americans with Disabilities Act of 1990 (ADA), one of the Nation's most important civil rights laws since the Civil Rights Act of 1964. The ADA opened up the true promise of America to people with disabilities who, for far too long, have found impediments to getting an education, getting a job, or just getting around.

I am proud that my father saw the need for a comprehensive law to liberate the energies and talents of people with disabilities, and who worked with the Congress to make the ADA a reality.

Much has been accomplished in the past 11 years. Attitudes are changing and barriers are coming down all across America. Employers now provide a range of "accommodations" to ensure that employees with disabilities can keep their place in the wage-earning world, resulting in unprecedented economic opportunities. And, outside of the workplace, the promise of the ADA, coupled with the entrepreneurial spirit of the private sector, has enabled people with disabilities to enjoy much greater access to a wide range of affordable travel, recreational opportunities, and life-enriching services.

Because of the ADA, people with disabilities are gaining equal access to public sec-

tor services. And the public sector has rallied to the ADA's goals. From improving access at town halls and courthouses to providing accessible parking to assistive listening devices at public meetings, States and local governments have developed some of the most innovative and meaningful responses to the ADA. In addition, my Administration is committed to full and effective implementation of Section 508 of the Rehabilitation Act, which will help ensure that people of all abilities can access government information and online services. My Administration is working closely with State and local governments to move people with disabilities out of institutions and into community-based settings, going above and beyond the requirements of the Supreme Court's landmark Olmstead decision.

In fact, the message of the ADA is being heard all around the world. Over 40 countries, from Australia to Uganda, now have laws prohibiting discrimination against people with disabilities—many of them inspired by the ADA.

Although we have accomplished much because of the ADA, our job is far from done. People with disabilities are far more likely than other Americans to drop out of high school or to suffer from poverty and unemployment. They are far less likely