

Remarks at the Kennedy Center Honors Reception December 8, 2002

Welcome to the East Room of the White House. We are glad you're here. Laura and I are so pleased to join you in honoring the achievements of five great Americans. We welcome the honorees, and we welcome their families and friends who share the pride of this special day.

Each new group of Kennedy Center honorees presents a picture to remember. This year we've brought together in one room a legend of Broadway, the conductor of the Met, the composer of "Mrs. Robinson"—[laughter]—the face of Cleopatra—[laughter]—and the voice of Darth Vader. [Laughter]

We're all looking forward to a fine show this evening at the Kennedy Center, produced once again by George Stevens. Tonight's event recognizes lives of high achievement in the cultural arts. Each one of you is known to the American people in a way that runs deeper than fame. You've each made a place of your own in the culture of our Nation. And tonight you can know that you are appreciated as well as being admired.

People say that the voice of the President is the most easily recognized voice in America. Well—[laughter]—I'm not going to make that claim in the presence of James Earl Jones. And that commanding voice belongs to one of the finest, most respected actors in this generation.

There was a time when his voice was seldom heard. You see, as a boy, Jimmy Jones struggled with a speech impediment. Often he could communicate with his teachers only in writing. This young man had a heart full of courage and determination. And so, he learned debating and public speaking, and he read Shakespeare aloud to master the feel and rhythm of language. Later, he cleaned offices while learning the actor's craft.

By his own will and God-given talent, James Earl Jones gained breakthrough roles on the stage and in some of the finest films of recent decades, from "The Great White Hope" to the "Field of Dreams." Along the way, Americans have come to know an artist of seriousness and skill. They've also come to know a man of great dignity whose voice we hope to hear for many years to come. Congratulations.

It is not commonly known, but Paul Simon got his start on the stage as well, as the White Rabbit—[laughter]—in a sixth grade production of "Alice in Wonderland." [Laughter] Playing the Cheshire Cat was his new friend Art Garfunkel.

Paul Simon still thinks of himself as a boy from Queens. America thinks of Paul Simon as the writer of some of the most memorable songs of our times and a singer of eloquence and integrity. From collaborative works such as "Bridge Over Troubled Waters" to the groundbreaking rhythms of "Graceland," Paul has defied musical boundaries, appealed to all generations, and expressed the ideals and hopes of mankind.

He once studied to be a lawyer. When he chose another path, the legal profession missed out on volumes of moving and lyrical briefs. [Laughter] His decision to be a performer led him to Paris, where in the early 1960's you could have seen Paul Simon performing alone, for anyone who cared to stop and listen could have not known then that he would one day draw some of the largest live audiences ever.

When you listen to Paul Simon's songs, you hear a gentle and truthful voice from a gifted man with a good heart. For the words and music he's brought to all our lives, America today honors Paul Simon.

James Levine knew from his earliest years that he was destined for a life in music. In the decades since, he has conducted major orchestras around the world

and is himself an institution as the maestro of the New York Metropolitan Opera.

At the age of 3, he was playing melodies on the piano. His mother and father took him to symphonies where he would sit with the open score on his lap, conducting with a knitting needle. [Laughter] By age 9, he was producing full operas on a puppet stage at home. Helen and Lawrence Levine encouraged their son's extraordinary talent, while letting nobody exploit him. This prodigy matured into one of the most influential conductors America has ever produced.

James Levine is known for an understated style, drawing attention to the music itself, with his vivid and precise interpretations. And his artistic vision has preserved and advanced the unmatched reputation of the Metropolitan Opera.

James Levine has said that "music chose me, because I can't remember life without it." For the rest of us, it is hard to think of American classical music without him. So tonight, the music world is grateful for the disciplined artistry and joyful presence of maestro James Levine.

Our fourth honoree has been described by one theater critic as "20,000 volts of untamed electricity." [Laughter] Anyone who has seen Chita Rivera on the stage or screen knows what that critic means. Her professionalism, enthusiasm, and style have set a Broadway standard that few have ever reached.

Chita began her training in classical ballet and became a star in "West Side Story." She went on to acclaimed performances in "Bye Bye Birdie," "Sweet Charity," "Chicago," and many other great shows. She's the owner of two Tony awards and has been nominated for five more. Her hard work and personal warmth have gained her the respect of her peers and the affection of the American people.

It is fitting we recognize these accomplishments here in her hometown. Her family lived on Buchanan Street. Chita's father played in the Navy Band. Her late mother, Katherine, who worked for the

Government, remains her inspiration in life. Chita said, "I am only an extension of my mother. I look like her. I think like her. Every step I do on that stage is for her." And I know, Chita, that your mother would also be proud of you today as America pays tribute to your distinguished career and your wonderful spirit.

On a fall afternoon in 1951, President Harry Truman welcomed a group of young actresses to the White House. [Laughter] Among them was Elizabeth Taylor. At that event, Truman wondered aloud what the next 50 years would bring in the film industry. He added, "I know some of these young ladies will see that day." Well, standing here in 2002, we are honored to welcome back that lovely girl who became one of the most accomplished and compelling actresses in movie history.

Elizabeth Taylor's early pictures, like "National Velvet" and "Lassie Come Home," turned many reviewers into fans. One wrote, "Her face is alive with youthful spirit. Her voice has the softness of sweet song, and her whole manner is one of refreshing grace." Through the years, her performances in such films as "Giant" and "Butterfield 8" and "Cat on a Hot Tin Roof" showed a depth and intensity that set her apart. Her face is one of the most memorable ever captured on film, and for millions of Americans, Elizabeth Taylor is the very definition of acting talent and movie stardom.

She has also given her heart to important causes, especially the defeat of AIDS. For her compassionate life and for a film career like no other, the Kennedy Center and the American people honor Elizabeth Taylor.

Each of our five honorees has shared great gifts and has enriched the life of our Nation. They have given us all many fond memories, and I hope these distinguished Americans and their families and friends will cherish the memory of this evening.

Thank you all for coming. May God bless you all, and may God continue to bless America.

NOTE: The President spoke at 5:22 p.m. in the East Room at the White House.

Remarks Announcing the Nomination of John Snow To Be Secretary of the Treasury *December 9, 2002*

The President. Thank you. Please be seated. Good morning. Today I'm pleased to announce my nominee for the Secretary of the Treasury. John Snow has excelled as a business leader, an expert on economic policy, an academic, and as a public servant. He'll be a superb member of my Cabinet.

I also want to welcome Carolyn here today. Thank you for coming. I'm honored you're here.

As we look to a new year and a new Congress, John Snow will be a key adviser on the economy and a key advocate for my administration's agenda for growth, new jobs, and wider and more international trade. I'll be proposing specific steps to increase the momentum of our economic recovery, and the Treasury Secretary will be at the center of this effort. I appreciate John's willingness to serve our country.

In a varied and productive career, John Snow has shown consistent qualities of foresight and integrity and public spirit. He's led one of our Nation's largest railroads with skill and success. He knows firsthand how the economy works. His peers elected him to lead the Business Roundtable, where he was an articulate voice for pro-growth policies.

John has a deep, longstanding commitment to ethical corporate governance. And as the cochairman of an important commission on public trust and private enterprise, he holds a Ph.D. in economics and has taught in the field. He served in the executive branch under two Presidents.

John returns to public service at an important moment for our economy. Inflation

is firmly under control, which keeps the cost of food, clothing, and other necessities more affordable. Mortgage rates interest remain at historic lows, making home prices more reasonable for millions of Americans. A 5.6-percent increase in productivity over the last four quarters is the biggest of any comparable period since 1973. And growth has returned to the American economy.

Yet, we also face specific challenges that could slow the recovery and limit future growth. Parts of America are expecting—are experiencing persistent unemployment. Many Americans have very little money leftover after taxes. Some struggle under a weight of debt that makes it difficult to save for retirement. Investor confidence needs to be strengthened in practical ways.

The new Congress will have a responsibility to address these challenges. My administration will make specific proposals as how best to address these challenges. I look forward to working with John Snow, as we move forward on a growth-and-jobs package. He and I share a basic conviction: We believe the strength of our economy lies in the unmatched enterprise and creativity and hard work of the American people.

It is the task of Government to create an environment in which these qualities are rewarded and where jobs are generated, especially by small businesses in America. My administration has acted on these principles, and we will continue to do so. John will be the senior member of a new economic team.