

Remarks on Presenting the Presidential Medal of Freedom June 19, 2008

The President. Welcome to the White House for what is going to be a joyous occasion. Mr. Vice President, Justice Scalia, members of my Cabinet and administration, Members of Congress, Medal of Freedom recipients and their families and friends: Thanks for coming. Laura and I are honored to welcome you here.

The Medal of Freedom is the highest civil honor a President can bestow. The award recognizes outstanding individuals who have been leaders in their chosen fields, have led lives of vision and character, and have made especially meritorious contributions to our Nation and the world. Today we add the names of six remarkable Americans to that select list.

The story of our first recipient begins in a poor neighborhood in the heart of Detroit. This was an environment where many young people lost themselves to poverty and crime and violence. For a time, young Ben Carson was headed down that same path. Yet through his reliance on faith and family, he turned his life into a sharply different direction. Today, Dr. Carson is one of the world's leading neurosurgeons. He is renowned for his successful efforts to separate conjoined twins and his expertise in controlling brain seizures. He has worked to be a motivating influence on young people. He and his wife Candy have started an organization that offers college scholarships to students across America. The child of Detroit who once saw a grim future became a scholar, a healer, and a leader.

Ben would be the first to tell you that his remarkable story would not be possible without the support of a woman who raised him and is at his side today. Some moms are simply forces of nature who never take no for an answer. [*Laughter*] I understand. [*Laughter*] Ben Carson's mom had a life filled with challenges. She was married at

the age of 13 and ultimately to—was left to raise her two sons alone. She made their education a high priority. Every week, the boys would have to check out library books and write reports on them. She would hand them back with check marks, as though she had reviewed them, never letting on that she couldn't read them. Even in the toughest times, she always encouraged her children's dreams. She never allowed them to see themselves as victims. She never, ever gave up. We're so thrilled you're here. Sonya Carson, welcome to the White House.

Ben has said that one of his role models is Booker T. Washington, who inspired millions and who was one of the first African American leaders ever to visit this house as a guest of a President. He walked on this very floor a little more than a century ago. Today, Ben Carson follows in his footsteps in more ways than one. He's lived true to the words that was once uttered by this great man: "Character, not circumstances, makes the man." Ben, you demonstrate that character every day through the life you lead, the care you provide, and the family that you put at the center of your life. Murray, B.J., and Rhoeyce, I know how proud your dad is of each of you. I'm delighted that you have a chance to see how proud our Nation is of him.

For his skills as a surgeon, high moral standards, and dedication to helping others, I am proud to bestow the Presidential Medal of Freedom on Dr. Benjamin S. Carson, Sr. [*Applause*] The bestowing part will take place a little later, Ben. [*Laughter*]

Three decades ago, a mysterious and terrifying plague began to take the lives of people across the world. Before this malady even had a name, it had a fierce opponent in Dr. Anthony Fauci. As the Director of

the National Institute of Allergy and Infectious Diseases for more than 23 years, Tony Fauci has led the fight against HIV and AIDS. He was also a leading architect and champion of the Emergency Plan for AIDS Relief, which over the past 5 years has reached millions of people, preventing HIV infections in infants and easing suffering and bringing dying communities back to life.

The man who would lead the fight against this dreaded disease came from an Italian American family in Brooklyn. Even as a boy, Tony was distinguished by his courage. In a neighborhood full of Brooklyn Dodgers fans, he rooted for the Yankees. [Laughter] Tony earned a full scholarship to Regis High School, a Jesuit school in Manhattan. And he still quotes what he learned from Jesuit teaching: "Precision of thought, economy of expression." And now you know why he never ran for public office. [Laughter]

Those who know Tony do admit one flaw. Sometimes he forgets to stop working. He regularly puts in 80-hour weeks. And from time to time, he's even found notes on his windshield left by his coworkers that say things like: "Go home. You're making me feel guilty." [Laughter] A friend once commented that Tony was so obsessed with work that his wife must be a pretty patient woman. The truth of the matter is, she's very busy herself. Christine Grady is a renowned bioethicist. And together they raised three talented daughters: Jennifer, Megan, and Alison. And I hope each of you know that for all Tony has accomplished, he considers you to be one of his—not one of his—his most important achievement. Your love and support have strengthened him as he works to save lives across the world.

For his determined and aggressive efforts to help others live longer and healthier lives, I'm proud to award the Presidential Medal of Freedom to Dr. Anthony S. Fauci.

When Tom Lantos was 16 years old, Nazi troops occupied his hometown of Budapest. During that bitter occupation, young Tom was active in the resistance. He twice was sent to a Nazi labor camp; both times he escaped. Tom and his wife Annette survived the Holocaust. Others in their family did not.

Their experiences amid Nazi terror shaped the rest of their lives. After they left Hungary and made California their home, Tom put his name on the ballot for a seat in the House of Representatives and became the only survivor of the Holocaust ever elected to Congress. One of his early acts was to establish the Congressional Human Rights Council [Caucus].^{*} Annette served as the Caucus's director. Tom earned the respect from both sides of the aisle, and he rose to become the chairman of the Foreign Affairs Committee. One colleague put it this way: "Tom was at the forefront of virtually every human rights battle over nearly three decades in the Congress."

On Capitol Hill, Tom displayed the energy and enthusiasm of people half his age. When he was in his seventies, he said that he was at the midpoint of his congressional career. [Laughter] When he was diagnosed with a fatal form of cancer, he responded with typical grace. As he announced his decision to retire from the job he loved, his words were not of despair but of gratitude for a nation that had given him so much. "Only in America," he said, "could a penniless survivor of the Holocaust receive an education, raise a family, and have the privilege of serving in the Congress." That dying servant of the people then said this: "I will never be able to express fully my profoundly felt gratitude to this great country."

America is equally grateful to Tom Lantos. We miss his powerful voice and his strong Hungarian accent. [Laughter] We miss his generosity of spirit. And we miss

^{*} White House correction.

his vigorous defense of human rights and his powerful witness for the cause of human freedom.

For a lifetime of leadership, for his commitment to liberty, and for his devoted service to his adopted nation, I am proud to award the Presidential Medal of Freedom, posthumously, to Tom Lantos. And proud that his loving wife Annette will receive the award on behalf of his family.

One of my great privileges as the President has been to meet so many outstanding Americans who volunteer to serve our Nation in uniform. I've been inspired by their valor, selflessness, and complete integrity. I found all those qualities in abundance in General Pete Pace. As Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, Pete Pace was a skilled and trusted adviser in a time of war. He helped transform our military into a more efficient and effective force in America's defense.

General Pace experienced the blessings America offers at an early age. He was born in Brooklyn to an Italian immigrant father who sometimes worked two or three jobs at a time to make ends meet. He was raised by a mom who instilled in him the sustaining power of faith. Together, his parents raised four children; each went on to great achievements in their chosen fields. That childhood gave young Pete Pace an early glimpse of what he would later call "the incredible benefits that our Nation bestows on those who come to our shores."

Pete Pace attended the Naval Academy and, as a young marine, soon found his way to Vietnam. At the age of 22, he took command of a platoon engaged in heavy fighting against the enemy during the Tet offensive. Pete quickly won the respect and the trust of his unit and formed a bond with all those who served with him. That bond only strengthened throughout his military career.

He was the first marine to serve as Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff. And he performed his duties with a keen intellect, a sharp wit, and a passionate devotion

to our country. He won the admiration of all who knew him. And that includes a soldier in Afghanistan who came up to General Pace last year during his farewell visit to that country and said simply: "Sir, thanks for your service. We'll take it from here."

On his final day in uniform, General Pace took a quiet journey to the Vietnam Veterans Memorial. He searched the names engraved in the sleek granite and then found a spot where he placed his four stars that had adorned his uniform. Along with those stars he attached notes addressed to the men who died under his first command some four decades ago. The notes said: "These are yours, not mine. With love and respect, your platoon leader, Pete Pace." General Pace ended his military career the same way that he began it, with love for his country and devotion to his fellow marines.

For his selfless service to his country and for always putting the interests of our men and women in uniform first, I am proud to award the Presidential Medal of Freedom to General Pete Pace.

When Donna Shalala was 10 years old, a tornado struck her house and her neighborhood near Cleveland. Her parents searched throughout the house for young Donna, but couldn't find her anywhere. She was finally spotted down the road, standing in the middle of the road directing traffic. [*Laughter*] Even at a young age, she was ready to take charge. [*Laughter*]

Donna was always an enthusiastic participant in life. She once played on the girls' softball team coached by George Steinbrenner. [*Laughter*] She also joined the Peace Corps and was stationed in the Middle East. I really wonder which one of those two experiences was more challenging. [*Laughter*]

In 1993, President Clinton nominated Donna as the Nation's Secretary of Health and Human Services. She served for a full two terms, longer than any other person who held that position. During her tenure, she developed a reputation for fairness and

a willingness to hear both sides of an issue. Former Republican Governor who worked closely with Donna called her cooperative and pragmatic. The late Texas columnist Molly Ivins once called her “almost disgustingly cheerful.” [Laughter] I knew Molly; that’s a high compliment. [Laughter]

As a college president, Donna has demonstrated her commitment to education. And as Cochair of the Dole-Shalala Commission on Care for America’s Returning Wounded Warriors, she has worked to ensure that we provide the best possible care for America’s veterans, especially those who have borne the scars of battle. I came to know Donna in the course of the Commission’s work. She believes deeply that our Nation has no more important responsibility than to make sure that we provide our veterans with all the love and care and support they deserve. Donna, you helped America move closer to realizing that noble goal, and your country is deeply grateful.

For her efforts to help more Americans live lives of purpose and dignity, I am proud to award the Presidential Medal of Freedom to Donna Edna Shalala.

Few men have played roles in as many memorable moments in recent American history as Laurence Silberman. He was a senior official in the Justice Department in the aftermath of Watergate and helped to restore America’s confidence in the Department. As Ambassador to Yugoslavia, he was a vigorous representative of America’s values behind the Iron Curtain. He was a fierce advocate for the “peace through strength” policies that helped win the cold war.

As a Federal judge on the DC circuit—often called the second-highest court in the land—Judge Silberman has been a passionate defender of judicial restraint. He writes opinions that one colleague has described as always cutting to the heart of the matter—sometimes to the jugular. [Laughter] His questioning is crisp and incisive, and at least one lawyer who was subjected to his inquiries actually fainted.

[Laughter] Judge Silberman was a particularly important influence on two other members of that court: Antonin Scalia and Clarence Thomas. When each was nominated to the Supreme Court, Judge Silberman, in typical fashion, was not sad to see them go. That’s because when Scalia left the court, Judge Silberman gained seniority, and when Thomas left the court, Judge Silberman gained his furniture. [Laughter]

In a new and dangerous era for our country, Larry Silberman has continued to answer the call to service. He served with distinction on the Foreign Intelligence Surveillance Court of Review. He took a year off from the Federal bench to serve as Cochairman of a bipartisan commission on intelligence reform. And in all his work, he’s remained a clear-eyed guardian of the Constitution. He continues to leave his distinctive mark in the opinions he issues and the generations of bright and talented lawyers he has trained.

For his resolute service to the Nation and his stalwart efforts to advance the cause of ordered liberty, I am proud to bestow the Presidential Medal of Freedom on Laurence H. Silberman.

My congratulations to each of the recipients. And now the military aide will read the citations for the Presidential Medals of Freedom.

[At this point, Lt. Cmdr. Robert A. Roncska, USN, Navy Aide to the President, read the citations, and the President presented the medals.]

The President. In honor of these distinguished men and women, Laura and I invite you to stay for a reception in the State Dining Room. Please enjoy yourselves. Congratulations. May God bless you all.

NOTE: The President spoke at 9:45 a.m. in the East Room at the White House. In his remarks, he referred to George M. Steinbrenner III, chairman, Major League Baseball’s New York Yankees; and former Gov. Tommy G. Thompson of Wisconsin.

Remarks in a Briefing on Flooding in the Midwest in Cedar Rapids, Iowa June 19, 2008

The President. Our job is to come down here—and I want to thank the Senator and Congressman and members of the Cabinet—just to listen to what you got on your mind. Obviously, to the extent that we can help immediately, we want to help, and then plan for recovery.

I know a lot of farmers and cattlemen are hurting right now, along with the city people. The other thing I think is just very important is that—and the Senator and Governor have made it clear—that as we worry about Cedar Rapids, we also got to worry about the little towns. A lot of folks are wondering whether or not the government hears about them too. And I can assure you that I know the Governor cares deeply about it, and so do we.

Paulison, who is the head of FEMA, tells me that there are 600 FEMA people moving around the State, and that ought to help the people in the smaller communities know that somebody is there to listen to them and care about them.

Our hearts and prayers are—from around the Nation go out to people here. It's a tough time for you.

Mayor Kathleen "Kay" Halloran of Cedar Rapids, IA. It is.

The President. The good news is, the people in Iowa are tough-minded people. I mean, you'll come back better. Sometimes it's hard to see it when you're this close to the deal.

Mayor Halloran. Well—and it's going to take time.

The President. A lot of people aren't getting much sleep these days, but—[laughter]. You're exhausted; I understand that.

But we want to—Congress passed a—is about to pass a big chunk of disaster money, which will put—help put people's mind at ease, and that will—we're going to help people—going to help you recover.

Anyway, thanks for letting me come by and see you.

Governor Chester J. Culver of Iowa. Thank you, Mr. President.

The President. Yes.

Gov. Culver. If I could, just very quickly, I want to thank the President on behalf of the people of Iowa—

The President. Get those cameras back in here. [Laughter]

Gov. Culver. And I want to make sure they get in trouble. [Laughter] But I also want to thank this incredible team, all of these people in this room, just an amazing team. All the people standing up here: Thank you. And we will rebuild this State and this city, and it will be even better and even stronger as a result. Thank you.

NOTE: The President spoke at 12:01 p.m. in the Lynn County Training and Response Center at Kirkwood Community College. In his remarks, he referred to Sen. Thomas R. Harkin; and Rep. David W. Loebsack. A portion of these remarks could not be verified because the tape was incomplete.

Remarks to Reporters in Iowa City, Iowa June 19, 2008

The President. Let me thank the mayor, thank the Governor. Mr. Congressman,

thanks for flying down from Washington