

Remarks on Presenting the Presidential Medal of Freedom January 13, 2009

The President. Good afternoon to everybody, and thank you all for coming. We have assembled quite a distinguished crowd to honor three good friends: President Uribe, Prime Minister Howard, and Prime Minister Blair. Laura and I welcome you to the White House.

You'll always be welcomed in our country. And we hope to have you come down and visit us in Texas. As you probably have heard, we're changing addresses here—[laughter]—in a little less than 7 days.

We're delighted to have a lot of distinguished guests, people who have worked with you throughout your time in office; members of your family who are here, we're really glad you've come.

I want to thank the Vice President, members of the Cabinet, and Members of the Congress who have joined us as well. We offer a special welcome to those who are personal friends of the honorees. I know they're as delighted to have you here as I am.

In a few moments the military aide will read the citations for the Presidential Medal of Freedom. The medal is America's highest civil award. It is given in recognition of exemplary achievement and to convey the utmost esteem of the people and the President of the United States.

In these 8 years, I have presented the Medal of Freedom to some of our most eminent citizens. On occasion, I have also had the honor of presenting it to citizens of other lands who inspired particular admiration in the United States and provided courageous leadership to our world. Among these recipients have been Vaclav Havel, Ellen Johnson Sirleaf, Nelson Mandela, and the late Pope John Paul II.

This afternoon I am pleased to award the Medal of Freedom to three extraordinary leaders. We honor a sitting President and two former vice—Prime

Ministers, each one of them a true friend of the United States who met historic challenges with great tenacity, and who provides a lasting example of statesmanship at home and abroad.

The first day I met Tony Blair, almost exactly 8 years ago, he was in his second term as Prime Minister, and I was just starting out. After our first meeting, a reporter asked if we'd found anything in common, and I jokingly replied that we both used Colgate toothpaste. [Laughter]

The truth is I did feel a close connection to Tony Blair. As I said after the first meeting, I knew that when either of us gets in a bind, there will be a friend on the other end of the phone. My friend was there, indeed, after America was attacked on September the 11th, 2001. And it just wasn't on the phone line. When I stood in the House Chamber to ask the civilized world to rally to freedom's cause, there in the gallery was the staunch friend, Prime Minister Tony Blair.

He was there in a moment of trial to affirm the special relationship between the United States and the United Kingdom. And he was there to show America, and all nations, that he understood the stakes in the war on terror. As he said, "Just as the terrorist seeks to divide humanity in hate, so we have to unify it around an idea. And that idea is liberty." Under Tony Blair's leadership, the might and the moral authority of Great Britain have been applied to the war on terror from the first day. Our nations have worked proudly together to destroy terrorist havens, liberate millions, and help rising democracies to serve the aspirations of their people.

Tony Blair's entire career is defined by his devotion to democratic values and human dignity. At his very center, this man believes in freedom: freedom from oppression, freedom from hunger, freedom from

disease, and freedom from fear and despair. In the House of Commons, as the longest serving Labour Prime Minister in history, he fought to lift up his nation's communities and better the lives of all its people. He helped turn generations of violence in Northern Ireland into years of peace. He drew the attention and conscience of the world to the suffering in Africa, and he continues to serve the cause of peace and democracy as the Quartet Envoy to the Middle East.

Out of office but still in public life, Tony Blair remains on the world stage as a man of high intelligence and insight, and above all, as a man of faith and idealism and integrity. The former Prime Minister of the United Kingdom will stand tall in history. And today the United States of America proudly honors its gallant friend Tony Blair.

John Howard of Australia has spent a lot of years in politics. He's won some, and he's lost a few. There was even a time, two decades ago, when he thought his days of political leadership might be over. A comeback, he said, would be like "Lazarus with a triple bypass." [Laughter] The man has got an unusual way of speaking. [Laughter]

With his plain-spoken style and unpretentious manner, John Howard did make a comeback. He rose to his nation's highest elected office, won four straight elections, and served longer than all other Australian Prime Ministers but one. And all the while, John Howard retained his close connection with the people of his country. His time in office was marked by great national confidence and prosperity and rising global influence. He won the respect of leaders around the world for his commitment to free markets, cooperation, and the peaceful resolution of differences. He was a faithful steward of Australia's alliances and a sturdy friend in a time of need.

At an event here in Washington, he reflected on the many tests that our two countries faced together in the 20th century. He spoke with feeling about our

shared values, as well as our obligation to defend them, and "if necessary fight for them, and be ready to repel those who would seek to take [our] freedoms away."

As it happens, John Howard spoke those words on Monday, September the 10th, 2001, and in all that followed, he proved true to his convictions. He always has been brave in the defense of freedom. In these 7 years, both our countries have lost innocent civilians and suffered casualties on the field of battle. But this man, who saw the burning Pentagon on September the 11th, and who confronted—comforted the survivors of Bali, never wavered in his commitment to overcoming this great danger to civilization. He never wavered in his support for liberty, and free institutions, and the rule of law as the true and hopeful alternatives to ideologies of violence and repression. He's a man of honesty and moral clarity. He can make a decision, he can defend it, and he stands his ground. That's why I called him a man of steel.

In the character of John Winston Howard we see that fine Australian spirit of "standing by your mates." Our two countries, though half a world apart, have long enjoyed an easy and natural fellowship. And the 25th Prime Minister of the Commonwealth of Australia stands for all that Americans like and admire most about this wonderful country.

So, Mr. Prime Minister, our friend, welcome to the White House and congratulations.

National leaders sometimes take office without fully knowing all the tests that await them. But when Alvaro Uribe became the President of Colombia, the challenges were in full view. He knew exactly what he was getting into.

For more than a generation, good and decent people across that country had lived at the mercy of brutal drug cartels and illegal, armed groups. A contagion of terrorist violence and killings and kidnappings had shaken the political system and caused

many Colombians to despair for their nation's future. Early in this decade, the Republic of Colombia was near the point of being, at best, a failed state, or at worst, a narco-state. In those conditions, it took more than ambition and ideals to run for political office; it required immense personal courage and strength of character.

As a Presidential candidate in 2002, Alvaro Uribe pledged to his people greater security, a healthier democracy, and a better chance for prosperous lives. He was elected on a theme that expressed perfectly what the Colombian people desired in a President: "Strong hand and big heart."

President Uribe's leadership has been resolute and uncompromising. Today, in Colombia, homicides are down 40 percent, kidnappings are down more than 80 percent, terror attacks are down by more than 75 percent. The forces of violence are on the defensive, and the people are reclaiming their country.

President Uribe's fellow citizens know him as someone who speaks forthrightly and follows through on his commitments. With his lifelong interest in public policy, he has a phenomenal grasp of the details of governing. At the same time, he has formed a powerful bond with his people. They've met their President in townhalls across the country. They've seen him deliver results. They like him, and they trust him. And they have made him the first Colombian leader in the modern era to win reelection.

Lately, I've been asked to reflect on the most memorable events of my Presidency. Among those is a phone call I received several months ago from President Uribe. He called to say that a group of hostages, including three Americans, that had been held in captivity for 5 years, had been rescued and were alive and safe and sound. It was a joyful moment, Mr. President. And it was a credit to your leadership.

For President Uribe, the great demands of office continue. Today the United States honors all Colombians by honoring the man

they have chosen to lead them. By refusing to allow the land he loves to be destroyed by an enemy within, by proving that terror can be opposed and defeated, President Uribe has reawakened the hopes of his countrymen and shown a model of leadership to a watching world. Colombia remains a nation with challenges. But the future will always be bright in a country that produces such men as President Alvaro Uribe.

Congratulations, *mi amigo*.

Each of these gentlemen we honor today has his own style and personality, and each has amassed distinctions and achievements that belong to him alone. Yet all of them have shown a firm adherence to the principles of freedom and democratic values and a willingness to face problems squarely instead of passing them on to others. They're the sort of guys who look you in the eye and tell you the truth and keep their word. In lengthy service they proved to be leaders of character and fortitude. They are warm friends of the United States of America. The opportunity to know them and work with them has been among the great satisfactions of my time as President. I respect them, and I admire them.

And now I ask the military aide to read the citations, and it will be my honor to present the Presidential Medal of Freedom to Tony Blair, John Howard, Alvaro Uribe.

[*At this point, Lt. Cmdr. Clay Beers, USN, Navy Aide to the President, read the citations, and the President presented the medals.*]

The President. In honor of these distinguished gentlemen, Laura and I invite you to stay for a reception in the State Dining Room. Please enjoy yourselves, and thank you for joining us here at the White House.

NOTE: The President spoke at 1:07 p.m. in the East Room at the White House. In his remarks, he referred to former President Vaclav Havel of the Czech Republic; President Ellen Johnson Sirleaf of Liberia; former

President Nelson R. Mandela of South Africa; and Marc Gonsalves, Thomas Howes, and Keith Stansell, former hostages held by the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia

(FARC). The Office of the Press Secretary also released a Spanish language transcript of these remarks.

Statement on the Situation in Cuba January 13, 2009

As much of the world celebrates the dawning of a new year, Cuba marks 50 years of one of the cruelest dictatorships this hemisphere has witnessed.

To those who yearn for liberty, all is not lost. The world has witnessed other instances of dictatorship, but has ultimately seen those regimes fall and formerly enslaved countries embrace their birthright of freedom. One day, the people of Cuba will enjoy this same blessing.

This message of hope is directed especially to those who have made pleas for freedom only to be silenced by tyranny and oppression: individuals like Oscar Elias Biscet, Luis Enrique Ferrer, Ricardo Gonzalez, Jose Luis Garcia Paneque, and many others. It is equally intended for the families of such prisoners, who dearly miss their loved ones and continue to suffer oppression at the hands of the regime. The American people admire the courage of these families and the emerging civil society movement, reflected in the existence of groups like the *Damas de Blanco*, who stand up for the fundamental human rights bestowed by our Creator.

As long as there are people who fight for liberty, the United States will stand with them and speak out for those whose voices have been temporarily silenced. All Cubans

have the right to be treated with dignity, so that they can rise as high as their talents and hard work will take them. This is the standard my administration and past administrations—regardless of political affiliation—have expected from the Cuban Government as the condition for improved relations.

My administration has continually challenged the Cuban Government to bring genuine political and economic changes and improve human rights and has made it clear that the United States stands prepared to respond to any request for assistance from a Cuba that transitions to democracy. The Castro regime's response to our offers has been continued repression of the Cuban people.

Throughout my Presidency, the plight of Cuba has been close to my heart. My sincere wish has been for the proud people of Cuba to take their rightful place in the community of democratic, freedom-loving nations.

Laura and I send our Cuban *hermanos y hermanas* a message of peace and love. May God bless you and continue to give you the faith and courage to fight for the day when the light of liberty will shine on the people of Cuba.