

Remarks at a White House Event Celebrating Poetry

May 11, 2011

Hello, everybody. Please have a seat. Welcome to the White House. I am going to be brief because on a night like tonight my job is to get out of the way and let the professionals do their job.

I do want to start by thanking our extraordinary performers for taking time out of their busy schedules to be with us. I also want to recognize the President's Committee on the Arts and the Humanities for putting on this event and for everything they do to support the arts.

The power of poetry is that everybody experiences it differently. There are no rules for what makes a great poem. Understanding it isn't just about metaphor or meter. Instead, a great poem is one that resonates with us, that challenges us, and that teaches us something about ourselves and the world that we live in. As Rita Dove says, "If [poetry] doesn't affect you on some level that cannot be explained in words, then the poem hasn't done its job." Also known as, it don't mean a thing if—[laughter]—it ain't got that swing. That's a little adlib there. [Laughter]

For thousands of years, people have been drawn to poetry in a very personal way, including me. In the spirit of full disclosure, I actually submitted a couple of poems to my college literary magazine, and you will be pleased to know that I will not be reading them tonight. [Laughter]

But as a nation built on freedom of expression, poets have always played an important role in telling our American story.

It was after the bombing of Fort McHenry during the War of 1812 that a young lawyer named Francis Scott Key penned the poem that would become our national anthem. The Statue of Liberty has always welcomed the "huddled masses yearning to breathe free." Soldiers going off to fight in World War II were giving—given books of poetry for comfort and inspiration. And whenever our Nation has faced a great tragedy, whether it was the loss of a civil rights leader, the crew of a space shuttle, or the thousands of Americans that were lost on a clear September day, we've turned to poetry when we can't find quite the right words to express what we're feeling.

So tonight we continue that tradition by hearing from some of our greatest, as well as some of our newest, poets. Billy Collins, who is here with us, calls poetry "the oldest form of travel writing" because it takes us to places we can only imagine. So in that spirit, I'd like everyone to sit back, or sit on the edge of your seats, and enjoy the journey.

Thank you very much.

NOTE: The President spoke at 7:14 p.m. in the East Room at the White House. In his remarks, he referred to former United States Poets Laureate Rita F. Dove and William J. Collins.

Remarks at the National Hispanic Prayer Breakfast

May 12, 2011

Thank you so much. Well, good morning. This is just an extraordinary gathering. I have to say to Reverend Cortes and all the other organizers of this prayer breakfast, I think it's getting bigger, huh? I think this thing is growing.

I just want to thank Reverend Cortes. I just got an extraordinary gift, a bilingual Bible. It is beautiful. I was told this will help improve my

Spanish. [Laughter] And I said, "I'll pray on it." [Laughter] Amen.

To all the clergy, lay leaders, administration officials, and distinguished guests who are here today, it is an extraordinary pleasure to join you. We've had a number of prayer breakfasts over the past several months, and I've got to say, there is no more inspiring way to begin a day

than by praying with fellow believers. And so I'm grateful to all of you to give me this opportunity.

I also know that these past few days have not only been a time of prayer and a time of reflection for all of you, they've also been a time to lend your voices to the causes that you're passionate about. And I want you to know that I'm listening. When you lend your voice to the cause of creating jobs and opening opportunity for all communities, I hear you. When you lend your voice to the cause of educating all of our children, not just some, to succeed in the 21st century, I'm listening. And when you lend your voice to the cause of immigration reform, I am listening.

As some of you probably heard, I flew down to El Paso a couple of days ago to give a speech on this topic. And what I said in that speech was that we define ourselves as a nation of immigrants, as a nation that's open to anyone who's willing to embrace America's precepts and America's ideals. That's why so many men and women have braved hardship and great risk to come here, picking up and leaving behind the world that they knew, carrying nothing but the hope that here in America, their children might live a better life.

Our heritage as a nation of immigrants is part of what has always made America strong. "Out of many, one"—that is our creed. And we are also a nation of laws—a nation of immigrants and a nation of laws. And what I went down to El Paso to say is that we are enforcing our laws and we're securing our borders. In fact, we have more manpower down at the Southwest border than at any time in our history.

And so what we need to do going forward is to address some of the broader problems in our immigration system. And that means changing minds and changing votes, one at a time. I know there are some folks who wish I could just bypass Congress. [*Laughter*] I can't. But what I can do is sign a law. What you can do is champion a law. What we can do together is make comprehensive immigration reform the law of the land. That's what we can do.

Comprehensive reform is not only an economic imperative or a security imperative, it's also a moral imperative. It's a moral imperative

when kids are being denied the chance to go to college or serve their military because of the actions of their parents. It's a moral imperative when millions of people live in the shadows and are made vulnerable to unscrupulous businesses or with nowhere to turn if they are wronged. It's a moral imperative when simply enforcing the law may mean inflicting pain on families who are just trying to do the right thing by their children.

So yes, immigration reform is a moral imperative, and so it's worth seeking greater understanding from our faith. As it is written in the Book of Deuteronomy, "Love ye therefore the stranger: for ye were strangers in the land of Egypt." To me, that verse is a call to show empathy to our brothers and our sisters, to try and recognize ourselves in one another.

And it's especially important that we try to do that when it comes to immigration, because this is a subject that can expose raw feelings and feed our fears of change. It can be tempting to think that those coming to America today are somehow different from us. And we need to not have amnesia about how we populated this country. What this verse reminds us to do is to look at that migrant farmer and see our own grandfather disembarking at Ellis Island or Angel Island in San Francisco Bay and to look at that young mother, newly arrived in this country, and see our own grandmothers leaving Italy or Ireland or Eastern Europe in search of something better.

That sense of connection, that sense of empathy, that moral compass, that conviction of what is right, is what led the National Association of Evangelicals to shoot short films to help people grasp the challenges facing immigrants. It's what led the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops to launch a Justice for Immigrants campaign and the Interfaith Immigration Coalition to advocate across religious lines. It's what led all the Latino pastors at the Hispanic Prayer Breakfast to come together around reform.

Ultimately, that's how change will come. At critical junctures throughout our history, it's often been men and women of faith who've helped to move this country forward. It was

our—in our Episcopal churches of Boston that our earliest patriots planned our Revolution. It was in the Baptist churches of Montgomery and Selma that the civil rights movement was born. And it's in the Catholic and Evangelical and mainline churches of our Southwest and across our entire continent that a new movement for immigration reform is taking shape today.

So I'll keep doing my part. I'll keep pushing and working with Congress. But the only way we are going to get this done is by building a widespread movement for reform. That's why I'm asking you to keep preaching and persuading your congregations and communities. That's why I'm asking you to keep on activating, getting involved, mobilizing. That's why

we all need to keep praying. I'm asking you to help us recognize ourselves in one another. And if you can do that, I'm absolutely confident that we will not only make sure America remains true to its heritage as a nation of immigrants and a nation of laws, but we'll make sure we remain true to our founding ideals and that we build a beloved community here on this Earth.

God bless you. God bless the United States of America. Thank you very much.

NOTE: The President spoke at 9:29 a.m. at the Andrew W. Mellon Auditorium. In his remarks, he referred to Rev. Luis Cortes, Jr., founder and president, Esperanza, who introduced the President.

Remarks at a Ceremony Honoring the National Association of Police Organizations TOP COPS

May 12, 2011

The President. Thank you so much. Thank you, everybody. Please, everybody have a seat.

Thank you, Joe, not just for being a great Vice President, but being one of law enforcement's best friends and strongest advocates over the years. I think they've gotten even more love from you than the railroads—[laughter]—and that's hard to do.

I look forward to this event every single year. I can't tell you how much I appreciate the efforts of law enforcement officials nationwide, not just because I've got several around me 24 hours a day. I have had the special honor of meeting police officers and law enforcement officials in all 50 States. Last week, I had the special honor of visiting with the men and women of New York City's First Precinct, which was the first to respond on 9/11 and serves the area encompassing Ground Zero.

And what I told them is the same thing that I'll tell all of the law enforcement professionals here today: Thank you. We appreciate your service. You have our support. We're grateful for the sacrifices you and your families make, and my administration is committed to making sure that you get what you need.

Some of the public servants helping us do that today are here: Our excellent Secretary of Homeland Security, Janet Napolitano; our Director of the Office of National Drug Control Policy, Gil Kerlikowske, is here—[applause]—a longtime police officer who also served as police chief in four different cities.

I'd also like to say that today I am seeking a 2-year extension for FBI Director Bob Mueller. And in his 10 years at the FBI, Bob has set the gold standard for leading the Bureau. He's improved the working relationship with local law enforcement across the country. And I hope that Democrats, led by Judiciary Chairman Pat Leahy, who's here, as well as Republicans in Congress will join together in extending that leadership for the sake of our Nation's safety and security.

We've also got several elected officials here today, and I'm grateful for their service and their support of law enforcement. And obviously, I want to welcome the leaders of the National Association of Police Organizations, including your president, Tom Nee, and your executive director, William Johnson.