

So, Mr. President, welcome. I look forward to a productive discussion and continue to hope that you and Prime Minister Netanyahu, but more importantly, the people of the Palestinian Territories and Israel, are ready to move forward in a new spirit of cooperation and compromise.

Thank you very much.

President Abbas. Thank you very much, Mr. President, and thank you for allowing us this opportunity, which we consider to be historic, for us to come here to the White House so that the efforts that you and Mr. Kerry expend—and these are great efforts—would be successful so that we can also reach a lasting peace to the Arab-Israeli conflict.

And I would like to also seize this opportunity to thank you, Mr. President, for the economic and political support that the U.S. is extending to the Palestinian state so that it can stand on its own feet.

I would also like to affirm what you have said, that we are working for a solution that is based on international legitimacy and also the borders—the 1967 borders so that the Palestinians can have their own independent state with East Jerusalem as its capital and so that we can find a fair and lasting solution to the refugee problem.

We don't have any time to waste. Time is not on our side, especially given the very difficult situation that the Middle East is experiencing and the entire region is facing. And we

hope that we would be able to seize this opportunity to achieve a lasting peace.

Since 1988 and into 1993, we have been extending our hands to our Israeli neighbors so that we can reach a fair and lasting peace to this problem. Since 1988, we have recognized international legitimacy resolutions, and in—and this was a very courageous step on the part of the Palestinian leadership. And in 1993, we recognized the State of Israel.

Mr. President, we have an agreement with Israel that was brokered by Mr. Kerry concerning the release of the fourth batch of prisoners, and we are hopeful that the last—that the fourth batch would be released by the 29th of March because this will give a very solid impression about the seriousness of these efforts to achieve peace.

Mr. President, I'm aware that you have several international concerns in various places around the world, and we know that you are dedicating your time and effort for peace, and so are the teams that are working on this. We count on these efforts, and we will build on them because we consider this to be a historic opportunity to achieve peace.

President Obama. Thank you very much.

NOTE: The President spoke at 11:12 a.m. in the Oval Office at the White House. In his remarks, he referred to Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu of Israel. President Abbas spoke in Arabic, and his remarks were translated by an interpreter.

Remarks on Presenting the Medal of Honor to 24 Army Veterans of World War II, the Korean War, and the Vietnam War

March 18, 2014

The President. Good afternoon, everybody. Please be seated. Well, welcome to the White House.

The presentation of our Nation's highest military decoration, the Medal of Honor, is always a special occasion. But today it is truly historic. This is the single largest group of servicemembers to be awarded the Medal of Honor since the Second World War. And with several of these soldiers recognized for their

valor during that war, this ceremony is 70 years in the making. As one family member has said, this is long overdue.

Many of these families—and I had a chance to meet all of them who are present here today—they've known these stories of heroism for decades. Still, they were pretty surprised when we called them to break the news about the Medal of Honor. Some of them thought it was a prank. [*Laughter*] Some of them thought

it was a scam. A few of them thought it might be some trick to get their credit card number. [Laughter] When I called Melvin Morris, who we'll recognize in a moment for his actions in Vietnam, his first reaction was, "Oh, my God, what have I done?" [Laughter] When I told him it was all good—the Medal of Honor—I could hear through the phone, he almost passed out. [Laughter]

You see, for their gallantry under fire each of these soldiers was long ago recognized with the Army's second highest award, the Distinguished Service Cross. But ask their fellow veterans, ask their families, and they'll tell you that their extraordinary deeds merited the highest recognition. And today we have the chance to set the record straight.

This ceremony reminds us of one of the enduring qualities that makes America great, that makes us exceptional. No nation is perfect, but here in America, we confront our imperfections and face a sometimes painful past, including the truth that some of these soldiers fought and died for a country that did not always see them as equal. So with each generation we keep on striving to live up to our ideals of freedom and equality and to recognize the dignity and patriotism of every person, no matter who they are, what they look like, or how they pray.

And that's why, more than a decade ago, Congress mandated a review to make sure that the heroism of our veterans wasn't overlooked because of prejudice or discrimination. Our military reviewed thousands of war records. They teamed up with veterans groups and museums to get this right. It was painstaking work, made even harder because sometimes, our servicemembers felt as if they needed to change their last names to fit in. That tells a story about our past. But ultimately, after years of review, these two dozen soldiers—among them Hispanic, African American, and Jewish veterans—were identified as having earned the Medal of Honor. This is the length to which America will go to make sure everyone who serves under our proud flag receives the thanks that they deserve.

So this is going to be a long ceremony. [Laughter] We're going to read all 24 citations because every one is a story of bravery that deserves to be told. But first, I want to take just a few minutes to describe the Americans behind these actions, the men these families know, the brilliant lives behind the smiling faces in those old photographs, and how they reflected all the beauty and diversity of the country that they served.

They were Americans by birth and Americans by choice, immigrants, including one who was not yet even a citizen. They grew up in big city neighborhoods like Brooklyn, rural communities like Hooper, Nebraska, small towns like Puerto Rico. They loved to fish and play baseball. They were sons who made their parents proud and brothers who their siblings looked up to. They were so young, many in their early twenties. And when their country went to war, they answered the call. They put on the uniform and hugged their families goodbye. Some of them hugged the wives and children that they'd never see again.

They fought in the rocky hills of Italy, the blood-stained beaches of France, in the freezing mountains of Korea, the humid jungles of Vietnam. Their courage almost defies imagination. When you read the records of these individuals, it's unimaginable, the valor that they displayed. Running into bullets. Charging machine gun nests and climbing aboard tanks and taking them out. Covering their comrades so they could make it to safety. Holding back enemies, wave after wave, even when the combat was hand to hand. Manning their posts—some to their very last breaths—so that their comrades might live.

Of the 24 American soldiers we honor today, 10 never came home. One of them—Corporal Joe Baldonado, from the Korean war—is still missing, reminding us that, as a nation, we have a sacred obligation to keep working to give the families of our missing servicemembers from all wars a full accounting of their loved ones.

Through their grief, the families of our fallen summoned the strength to carry on: wives whose hearts ached for their husbands, sons

and daughters who grew up without their dad, nieces and nephews and grandchildren. And these families join us here today. And they know, more than most, that because others laid down their lives for us, we've been able to live our lives in freedom, pursue our dreams. So there's a legacy here born of sacrifice.

That includes a soldier's nephew, a kid from New York, who grew up to become one of the great rock stars of all time and who honors his uncle here today. It includes soldiers who came home and took different paths: some continuing to serve in uniform, some beginning new careers, some getting married and raising their kids, serving their communities, taking care of their fellow vets.

These veterans lived out their lives in the country that they helped to defend and doing what they love, like William Leonard, who at age 71 passed away in his backyard, sitting in his chair, listening to his beloved Yankees play on the radio.

And that's where this story might have ended. But Mitchel Libman, a friend of one of these soldiers and an Army vet himself, set out on a mission. He and his wife Marilyn spent years writing letters and working with Congress and our military to get this done. And so we thank all those who worked so hard for so long to bring us to this moment, especially Marilyn and Mitchel—now 83 years old—who I'd ask to stand so that we can all say thank you.

Finally, of these 24 soldiers, 3 remain with us and have joined us here today, men who remind us that sometimes, the heroes we seek are right in front of us, literally living right next door.

Most days, you can find Jose Rodela at his San Antonio home, a 76-year-old retiree who enjoys watching baseball on TV and working on his 1975 Chevy pickup and mowing the grass for his neighbors. Joe is such a humble guy—Jose is such a humble guy that he did not even mention the ceremony to his neighbors, who I think would be pretty shocked to turn on the news tonight—[laughter]—and see that the guy who cuts their lawn is getting the Medal of Honor. [Laughter] Today we remember how 32-year-old Sergeant First Class Rodela

fought through his wounds in Vietnam and rallied his men during 18 hours of constant combat.

Most days, you can find Melvin Morris at home in Port St. John, Florida, 72 years old, a retired salesman and a great-grandfather. You'll find him working on his boat, going fishing, reading the Bible, spending time with his beautiful wife Mary, married 53 years this month. You're going to have to give me some tips. [Laughter] I'm—we're not that far along yet. [Laughter] Today we remember how 27-year-old Staff Sergeant Morris, one of our Nation's very first Green Berets—one of our very first Green Berets. Think about that. I mean, that's legendary—how Staff Sergeant Morris recovered a fallen comrade in Vietnam, took out several enemy bunkers and kept going even after he was shot three times.

And on most days, you can find Santiago Erevia at home in San Antonio. He's a 68-year-old retired postal worker. He's fixing up his house, typically, tending to the garden, going on walks with his wife, or doing some pushups to stay in shape. [Laughter] Today we remember how 23-year-old Specialist-4 Erevia, under a hail of bullets in Vietnam, gave first aid to his wounded comrades and singlehandedly destroyed four enemy bunkers.

These are extraordinary Americans. They are exemplary soldiers. And so I want to begin by welcoming Santiago Erevia to stage for the reading of the citation.

[At this point, Lt. Cmdr. Tiffany F. Hill, USN, Navy Aide to the President, read the citation. The President then presented the medal, assisted by Lt. Col. S. Lee Meyer, USMC, Marine Corps Aide to the President. After receiving the medal, S4 Erevia returned to his seat. Sfc. Melvin Morris was then called to the stage for the reading of the citation. Maj. Matthew Newell, USAF, Air Force Aide to the President, read the citation, and the President presented the medal. After receiving the medal, Sfc. Morris returned to his seat. Sfc. Jose Rodela was then called to the stage for the reading of the citation. Lt. Cmdr. Hill read the citation, and the President presented the medal.]

The President. Before Jose returns to his seat, I just want to ask Santiago and Melvin to return to the stage, please. This is a remarkable moment. And as they come up, I'd like to recall—

[*The President greeted S4 Erevia and Sfc. Morris as they returned to the stage.*]

The President. As they take their positions, I'd like to recall the words of a poet:

Tho' much is taken, much abides; and
tho'
We are not now that strength which in old
days
Moved earth and heaven; that which we
are, we are;
One equal temper of heroic hearts,
Made weak by time and fate, but strong
in will
To strive, to seek, to find, and not to yield.

Santiago Erevia, Melvin Morris, Jose Rodela: In the thick of the fight, all those years ago, for your comrades and your country, you refused to yield. And on behalf of a grateful nation, we all want to thank you for inspiring us—then and now—with your strength, your will, and your heroic hearts.

Please give them a big round of applause.

Gentlemen, thank you. Please take your seats. We'll proceed with the rest of the ceremony.

[*Medals were presented posthumously to the following individuals: S4 Leonard L. Alvarado, Sfc. Felix M. Conde-Falcon, S4 Ardie R. Copas, S4 Jesus S. Duran, Sgt. Candelario Garcia, Cpl. Joe R. Baldonado, Cpl. Victor H. Espinoza, Sgt. Eduardo C. Gomez, Pfc. Leonard M. Kravitz, Sgt. Juan E. Negron, M. Sgt. Mike C. Pena, Pvt. Demensio Rivera, Pvt. Miguel A. Vera, Sgt. Jack Weinstein, Pvt. Pedro Cano, Pvt. Joe Gandara, Pfc. Salvador J. Lara, Pfc. Wil-*

liam F. Leonard, S. Sgt. Manuel V. Mendoza, Sgt. Alfred B. Nietzel, and 1st Lt. Donald K. Schwab. For each recipient, the citation was read, and the President then presented the medal to a surviving relative.]

The President. Ladies and gentlemen, it is very rare where we have the opportunity to reflect on the extraordinary courage and patriotism of such a remarkable collection of men. We are so grateful to them. We are so grateful to their families. It makes us proud, and it makes us inspired. And so, before we conclude the program, I would ask all those who have witnessed this extraordinary day to please rise and give these latest recipients of the Medal of Honor your warmest applause.

Chaplain, would you give us the benediction?

[*Maj. Gen. Donald L. Rutherford, USA, Army Chief of Chaplains, said a prayer.*]

Thank you so much, everybody. This concludes our program. But please have an opportunity to enjoy the White House. We are so grateful that all of you had a chance to come. God bless you. God bless America.

NOTE: The President spoke at 3:33 p.m. in the East Room at the White House. In his remarks, he referred to musician Lenny A. Kravitz, nephew of Medal of Honor recipient Leonard M. Kravitz; Marilyn Libman, wife of Mitchel Libman, a Korean war veteran who spent 60 years writing letters to the Pentagon urging them to award Leonard M. Kravitz the Medal of Honor; Mary Morris, wife of Medal of Honor recipient Melvin Morris; and Leticia Erevia, wife of Medal of Honor recipient Santiago J. Erevia. The transcript released by the Office of the Press Secretary also included the reading of the citations.

Remarks at a White House Screening of “Cesar Chavez” March 19, 2014

The President. Welcome to the White House. We are here to celebrate the life of an

American hero. Cesar Chavez was a man who devoted this brief time that we have on Earth