

Administration of Barack Obama, 2011

Remarks Honoring the NCAA Men's Basketball Champion University of Connecticut Huskies

May 16, 2011

The President. Hello, everybody! Welcome. Please, have a seat. Have a seat. Welcome to the White House, and congratulations to the Huskies on being the best college basketball team in the land.

Before we start, I want to acknowledge a big Huskies fan that's in the house: Senator Joe Lieberman is here. I know he is proud of this team.

I have to be honest, this is a bittersweet day for me. *[Laughter]* On the one hand, I get to congratulate a great team and a great coach on winning the national championship. On the other hand, I'm reminded once again that my bracket was a bust. *[Laughter]* I did not pick UConn to win it all. That was a big mistake. *[Laughter]* I was just mentioning to Coach that it was because Andy Katz of ESPN told me there's no way UConn was winning. *[Laughter]* I did have these guys going to the Elite Eight, and I was doing pretty well in my pool at the beginning of the tournament, and then things completely fell apart.

But I was not alone. Let's face it, this was a tough year for a lot of brackets because teams like this one shocked the world. So next time you guys decide to reel off 11 straight wins, please let me know ahead of time. *[Laughter]*

Because the truth is, UConn's perfect run through the Big East and the NCAA tournament was a surprise to everybody but themselves and Coach. These guys knew they had something special. And even though they finished the regular season tied for ninth in the Big East, even though there were some rough spots during the season, these players just put their heads down, they worked hard, and they focused on winning the games that counted.

They succeeded because everybody knew that they had a role to play. There was, of course, Coach Calhoun, who now joins John Wooden, Adolph Rupp, and Mike Krzyzewski, and Bobby Knight as the only coaches ever to win three national championships. That's pretty good company there, Coach.

There's Shabazz Napier, who sang and danced and talked his way through a incredible freshman season. *[Laughter]* If he's making rabbit ears behind me or anything like that, please stop him. *[Laughter]*

At the other end of the spectrum there's Jeremy Lamb. He's sort of the anti-Shabazz. *[Laughter]* He's quiet. *[Laughter]* But he let's his play do the talking and exploded to average 15 points a game during the postseason.

And then there's Kemba Walker who—*[applause]*—this is a guy who wanted to go to UConn so badly in high school that he recruited them—never afraid to take a last shot, a player who will go down in history as one of the greatest ever to wear the Huskies uniform, and a player who always lived by his dad's advice that, "it's not the size of the person, it's the size of the heart."

So if you put all that together—young team, long-shot odds, and then a postseason run, and the Kemba show—that was a pretty inspiring season.

I want to thank all the players, all the coaches who held the basketball clinic earlier this afternoon and inspiring some future stars here from DC. I think you made their year. And I want to thank everybody who is involved in the UConn family, because obviously this has been a great program for many, many years, Coach. And I know that you could not do it without all the folks who are represented here today: assistant coaches, trainers, folks in the athletic department, everybody who has been so supportive of this outstanding, outstanding program.

So congratulations to all of you. Hopefully, we will see you again soon. You got a bunch of freshmen, so I don't see why these guys couldn't go on a pretty good run here. But we couldn't be prouder of them, and I know that the great State of Connecticut couldn't be prouder of them as well.

So congratulations.

Coach James C. Calhoun. Well, thank you, Mr. President. As you know, Kemba was waiting for you—when you were up in the air, he was down on the ground, because—unfortunately, he actually was up in the air stuck at LaGuardia Airport for 3 hours. But he did want that one-on-one game with you.

The President. I'm ready. [*Laughter*]

Coach Calhoun. Does he have enough game, you think?

The President. As long as he's wearing street shoes and a suit. [*Laughter*]

Coach Calhoun. I like a guy with edges. [*Laughter*] President and folks, I just want to say it's a thrill for us to be here representing the State of Connecticut, certainly the University of Connecticut. Joe Lieberman was there a long time ago before we started going to the White House occasionally.

The President. It was a really long time ago. [*Laughter*]

Coach Calhoun. Matter of fact—no, we'll get into that at another time. But it's been a thrill. This year was reminding me in many, many ways, between my wife and myself, rooting you on. We stopped with the team at the Lincoln Memorial, and I know how much you admired Lincoln.

I was telling our kids just when great things happen, like—I happened to be buying some bookmarkers for the kids that you might recognize.

The President. Absolutely.

Coach Calhoun. And I said simply that people like Lincoln and Martin Luther King and so on, maybe our President, were speeding along in the process of being something special that he truly is. And I believe that and feel that way.

This basketball team, by the way, was kind of an underdog, much as you were. And who would have thought, 15 years ago—who would have thought maybe 9 months ago we would be here.

But you know what? Yes we can. [*Laughter*]

The President. Yes we can. I like that.

Coach Calhoun. And like you, Mr. President, yes we did. We did because we cared. We cared as a family. We cared about each other. We accepted our roles. We accepted who we are, and did anything possible to be the best we possibly can become. I watched your rise—

magnificent. I've watched their rise, and it's been one of the most emotional seasons of my entire life.

I'm proud of what you've done, certainly, and I'm certainly proud of my kids. And I just thank you very much for having us here. And I want to especially congratulate you, because last night I knew you were pretty excited to watch the Chicago Bulls. Am I correct?

The President. I was. [*Laughter*]

Coach Calhoun. That was an easy call.

The President. What do you think? Some of you guys may want to look at the Bulls organization. They could use a shooter. [*Laughter*]

Coach Calhoun. But once again, thank you for everything, Mr. President.

The President. Thank you so much.

Coach Calhoun. We really appreciate having you here, and you're an inspiration to so many young people, definitely a lot of the people I've coached. And I just want to say that you make us all feel proud about our country and certainly feel proud when you interject athletics and education, because it's very important to us.

The President. Thank you so much.

Coach Calhoun. And I've got someone special to bring up now, Kemba Walker. Kemba, come on.

Guard Kemba Walker. I just want to say—I want to thank everybody for coming out. I have one question for the President. I wanted to ask you, can you teach me that walk?

The President. That walk? [*Laughter*] That's a special Presidential walk—[*laughter*]—so—but maybe in a few years. You look pretty good behind the podium, I got to say. [*Laughter*]

Mr. Walker. I'm looking forward to that. [*Laughter*] But on behalf of the team, we all just—we want to give you this jersey.

[*At this point, the President was presented with a team jersey.*]

The President. All right. Oh, man, that's outstanding. Thank you. That's a good-looking jersey there.

Absolutely. There you go. Fantastic.

All right, we're going to strike the podium and get a good picture with the whole crew.

NOTE: The President spoke at 5:43 p.m. in the East Room at the White House. In his remarks, he referred to Michael W. Krzyzewski, head coach, Duke University men's basketball team; Robert M. Knight, former head coach of the U.S. Military Academy at West Point, Indiana University, and Texas Tech University men's basketball teams; and Shabazz Napier, guard, and Jeremy Lamb, guard/forward, University of Connecticut men's basketball team.

Categories: Addresses and Remarks : NCAA men's basketball champion University of Connecticut Huskies.

Locations: Washington, DC.

Names: Callhoun, James C.; Katz, Andy; Knight, Robert M.; Krzyzewski, Michael W.; Lamb, Jeremy; Lieberman, Joseph I.; Napier, Shabazz; Walker, Kemba; Wooden, John R.

Subjects: Sports : Basketball; Sports : NCAA championship teams.

DCPD Number: DCPD201100353.