

Administration of Barack Obama, 2013

Remarks at a Dinner in Commemoration of the 50th Anniversary of the Presidential Medal of Freedom

November 20, 2013

The President. Good evening, everybody. Please have a seat. Michelle and I are so pleased to join you tonight to honor the legacy of an American leader in a building dedicated to the preservation of our American history.

And we are thrilled to be joined by so many people whose accomplishments helped write new chapters in that history. This morning I recognized 16 brilliant, compassionate, wildly talented people with the Presidential Medal of Freedom, the Nation's highest civilian award. And that was intimidating enough. Tonight I'm facing dozens of you.

To the Presidential Medal of Freedom recipients of this year and years past, it is a great honor to be with you for this anniversary celebration. To Wayne Clough, thank you for hosting us and for all the Smithsonian does to enrich our cultural heritage. And to Jack, I have to say that our new Ambassador to Japan, I'm sure, would be pleased with how you performed this evening. I'll give her a full report. [*Laughter*] To all the family members of the Kennedy family, we are grateful for your presence and your enduring contributions to the life of our country.

For centuries, awards have existed for military valor. And 50 years ago, President John F. Kennedy established a way to award extraordinary civilian virtue: contributions to our country, service to our democracy, a dedication to our humanity that has advanced the common interest of freedom-loving people, both here at home and around the world.

Since its creation, the Presidential Medal of Freedom has paid tribute to the creativity of writers, and artists, and entertainers. We've recognized the leadership of elected officials and civil rights organizers, the imagination of scientists and business leaders, the grit and determination of our astronauts and our athletes. Because there is no one way to contribute to the success of America. What makes us great is that we believe in a certain set of values that encourage freedom of expression and aspiration. We celebrate imagination and education and occasional rebellion. And we refuse to set limits on what we can do or who we can be.

And other peoples in other times have marked their history by moments of conquest at war, by dominion over empires. But in the arc of human history, the American experience stands apart, because our triumph is not simply found in the exertion of our power, it's found in the example of our people. Our particular genius over 237 years has been something more than the sum of our individual excellence, but rather a culmination of our common endeavors.

It's a truth that resonated with President Kennedy when he said, ". . . I am certain that after the dust of centuries has passed over our cities, we . . . will be remembered not for our victories or defeats in battle or in politics, but for our contribution to the human spirit."

And that unbending belief that the power to make great a nation is found in its people and in their freedom, that was his philosophy. That is his legacy.

And it's a legacy told in villages around the world that have clean water or a new school and a steady friend in the United States, thanks to the volunteers of the Peace Corps. It's a legacy found in the courage of all who serve under our proud flag, willing, like President

Kennedy himself, to pay any price and bear any burden for the survival and success of our liberty.

It's a legacy on display in the arts and culture that he and Jackie championed as part of our national character, a legacy planted on the Moon that he said that we'd visit and that we did, in the stars beyond, but also in the breakthroughs of the generations of scientists that his audacious promise inspired.

It's a legacy continued by his brothers and his sisters, who have left this a more gentle and compassionate country. Jean, a Medal of Freedom recipient herself and a diplomat in every sense, is with us tonight. Bobby, whose wife, Ethel is one of my dearest friends, as Jack noted, we'd be celebrating Bobby's 88th birthday today. Eunice and Pat were devoted advocates for Americans of all abilities. And Teddy, the youngest brother with the biggest heart, he was a happy warrior who never forgot who we were sent here to serve and waged a decades-long battle on behalf of those folks who sent us here: for workers' rights and immigrants' rights and the right to affordable health care. Tonight our sympathies are with the love of Teddy's life, Vicki, as she mourns the loss of her father, Judge Edmund Reggie.

And it's all told a legacy of service that the Kennedy family continues to this day: from Caroline, who's already drawing crowds of her own as she settles into her role as Ambassador in Japan; to his great-nephew, and Massachusetts' newest Congressman, Joe Kennedy; to the school of public service that bears the family name and teaches its young leaders how they too might one day pass the torch to a new generation.

This is a legacy of a man who could have retreated to a life of luxury and ease, but who chose to live a life in the arena, sailing sometimes against the wind, sometimes with it. And that's why, 50 years later, John F. Kennedy stands for posterity as he did in life: young and bold and daring. And he stays with us in our imagination not because he left us too soon, but because he embodied the character of the people that he led: resilient, resolute; fearless and fun-loving; defiant in the face of impossible odds; and most of all, determined to make the world anew, not settling for what is, but rather for what might be. And in his idealism—his sober, square-jawed idealism—we are reminded that the power to change this country is ours.

This afternoon Michelle and I were joined by President Clinton and Secretary Clinton to pay tribute to that proud legacy. We had a chance to lay a wreath at the gravesite at Arlington, where President Kennedy is surrounded by his wife and younger brothers, and where he will rest in peace for all time, remembered not just for his victories in battle or in politics, but for the words he uttered all those years ago: "We will be remembered for our contribution to the human spirit."

How blessed we are to live in a country where these contributions overflow in ways both heralded and not so heralded. The thousands of people in San Francisco who helped a little boy recovering from cancer live out his superhero dreams, that's part of that spirit. The Marines deploying relief after a devastating typhoon and all across an ocean, people checking on their neighbors after a tornado, the families across the country who will spend Thanksgiving Day cooking feasts so others less fortunate might eat—that's part of the spirit.

That's who we are: a people whose greatness comes not by settling for what we can achieve in our own lives, but also because we dare to ask what we can do, as citizens, to contribute to this grand experiment we call America.

And that's what our Presidential Medal of Freedom honorees embody, each and every one of them who are here today and those who we remember posthumously. That's the living

legacy of the Kennedy family. And that is the responsibility we all welcome, as Americans, for our lifetime on this planet.

We are extraordinarily blessed to be Americans because we have the opportunity to serve in ways that so many of you have served, because we have the opportunity to touch lives in the ways that so many of you have touched lives.

God bless you all, and God bless the United States of America.

NOTE: The President spoke at 7:26 p.m. at the National Museum of American History. In his remarks, he referred to U.S. Ambassador to Japan Caroline Bouvier Kennedy; Jean Kennedy Smith, sister of the former President John F. Kennedy; Ethel Kennedy, widow of former Attorney General Robert F. Kennedy; former Rep. Patrick J. Kennedy II; Victoria Reggie Kennedy, widow of former Sen. Edward M. Kennedy; and Miles Scott, a 5-year-old cancer patient who, with the help of the Make-A-Wish Foundation, was given an opportunity to be the superhero "Batkid" for a day in San Francisco, CA.

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Locations: Washington, DC.

Names: Clinton, Hillary Rodham; Clinton, William J.; Clough, G. Wayne; Kennedy, Carolina Bouvier; Kennedy, Caroline Bouvier; Kennedy, Ethel; Kennedy, Joseph P., III; Kennedy, Patrick J., II; Kennedy, Victoria Reggie; Obama, Michelle; Schlossberg, John; Scott, Miles; Smith, Jean Kennedy.

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