

Administration of Barack Obama, 2014

Remarks on Presenting the National Medal of Arts and the National Humanities Medal

July 28, 2014

Thank you, everybody. Please have a seat.

Well, welcome to the White House. It has been 200 years since Dolley Madison saved the portrait of George Washington that hangs in this room from an advancing British Army. So I guess you could say that the White House has always supported the arts. *[Laughter]* I'm glad to say that Michelle has never had to save any paintings that I know of, from Bo or otherwise. *[Laughter]* But we do believe in celebrating extraordinarily talented Americans and their achievements in the arts and in the humanities.

So I want to thank Jane Chu and Bro Adams, the chairs of the National Endowment of the Arts and the National Endowment of the Humanities, for their outstanding work. And I want to thank Members of Congress, including a great champion of the arts, Nancy Pelosi, for joining us this afternoon.

The late, great Maya Angelou once said, "A bird doesn't sing because it has an answer, it sings because it has a song." Each of the men and women that we honor today has a song, literally, in some cases. For others, it's a talent or a drive or a passion that they just had to share with the world.

To our honorees: Like most creative and brainy people, you did not cultivate your song for accolades or applause. If there were no medal for your work, I expect you'd still be out there designing buildings and making movies and digging through archives and asking tough questions in interviews.

But we do honor you today because your accomplishments have enriched our lives and reveal something about ourselves and about our country. We can never take for granted the flash of insight that comes from watching a great documentary or reading a great memoir or novel or seeing an extraordinary piece of architecture. We can't forget the wonder we feel when we stand before an incredible work of art or the world of memories we find unlocked with a simple movement or a single note.

So the moments you help create—moments of understanding or awe or joy or sorrow—they add texture to our lives. They are not incidental to the American experience; they are central to it, they are essential to it. So we not only congratulate you this afternoon, we thank you for an extraordinary lifetime of achievement.

I'll just close by telling a tale of something that took place in this house, back in 1862. President Lincoln called together a meeting of his Cabinet to present them with the Emancipation Proclamation. But that was not the first item on his agenda. This is a little-known story. Instead, he began reading out loud from a story from the humorist Artemus Ward. It was a story called, "High-Handed Outrage at Utica." According to one often-repeated account, after he finished a chapter, Lincoln laughed and laughed. His Cabinet did not. *[Laughter]* So Lincoln read them another chapter. *[Laughter]* And they still sat there in stony silence. Finally, he put the book down, and said: "Gentlemen, why don't you laugh? You need this medicine as much as I do." *[Laughter]*

To be clear, I probably will not be trying this in my Cabinet meetings. [Laughter] Certainly, not if I'm presenting something like the Emancipation Proclamation. [Laughter] But what Lincoln understood is that the arts and the humanities aren't just there to be consumed and enjoyed whenever we have a free moment in our lives. We rely on them constantly. We need them. Like medicine, they help us live.

So once again, I want to thank tonight's honorees for creating work that I'm sure would have met President Lincoln's high standards. In this complicated world, and in these challenging times, you've shared a song with us and enhanced the character of our country, and for that we are extraordinarily grateful.

It is now my privilege to present these medals to each of the recipients after their citation is read.

So, our outstanding military aides, please.

[At this point, Lt. Col. Michael P. Wagner, USA, Army Aide to the President, read the citations, and the President presented the medals, assisted by Maj. Steven M. Schreiber, USMC, Marine Corps Aide to the President.]

I think now is a good time for everybody to stand up and give these outstanding winners—or recipients a big round of applause. Yay!

So congratulations to all of you. We could not be more appreciative of everything you've done. I was mentioning, as people were coming up, I've been personally touched by all sorts of these folks. I was mentioning to Maxine that when I was first writing my first book and trying to teach myself how to write, "The Women Warriors" was one of the books I read. After the book was done, Diane was one of the few interviews that was granted. [Laughter] I told Linda Ronstadt I had a little crush on her back in the day. [Laughter] So—and I know all of you have been touched similarly by these amazing people.

So we are very grateful to you. On behalf of Michelle and myself, as we're taking pictures with the recipients and the family—their families, please continue to enjoy the reception here.

Thank you very much, everybody.

NOTE: The President spoke at 3:18 p.m. in the East Room at the White House. In his remarks, he referred to author Maxine Hong Kingston; syndicated radio talk show host Diane Rehm; and musician Linda Ronstadt. The transcript released by the Office of the Press Secretary also included the reading of the citations.

Categories: Addresses and Remarks : National Medal of Arts and National Humanities Medal.

Locations: Washington, DC.

Names: Adams, William "Bro"; Chu, Jane; Kingston, Maxine Hong; Obama, Michelle; Pelosi, Nancy; Rehm, Diane; Ronstadt, Linda.

Subjects: Arts, National Endowment for the; Decorations, medals, and awards : Arts, National Medal of; Decorations, medals, and awards : Humanities Medal, National; Humanities, National Endowment for the.

DCPD Number: DCPD201400576.