

Remarks on Presenting the Presidential Citizens Medal to Bernice Young Jones February 26, 1996

The President. I want to begin, Bernice, by welcoming members of your family and your friends here, and we're especially glad to have Senator Bumpers and Congressman Hutchinson come.

I learned this morning something I did not know, that this is your first trip to Washington. Well, to have managed to live as many years as you have—

Ms. Jones. Ninety. [Laughter]

The President. —without ever coming to Washington, that alone is justification for this award. [Laughter]

Ms. Jones. And that's my sister, and it's her first trip, and she's 92.

Hillary Clinton. Is that right?

The President. Well, neither one of you look it, and we're glad to have you.

Hillary Clinton. That's probably why they look so good. [Laughter]

The President. Let me say that for me, personally, this is a great pleasure because I know very well of the extraordinary work you have done for health care in Arkansas, for education,

and of course, the center you established in your name and your late husband's name for families in Springdale. The things that you have done and stood for and tried to help are the things that all of us in America should be trying to advance. And you are a shining example for philanthropy in our country.

I can only hope that every State will find someone like you to help do what needs to be done. And it is for that reason that I wanted to give you this President's Citizens Medal. And I'm very glad you decided to take leave of your very good policy and at least one time come to Washington, DC. [Laughter]

Ms. Jones. Thank you so much. I appreciate it for myself, my family, my friends, my wonderful Springdale, and Arkansas.

The President. I'd like to ask my military aide now to read the citation.

NOTE: The President spoke at 10 a.m. in the Oval Office at the White House. A tape was not available for verification of the content of these remarks.

Teleconference Remarks to the National Emergency Management Association February 26, 1996

The President. Hello.

Federal Emergency Management Agency Director James Lee Witt. Mr. President, good morning.

The President. Good morning, James Lee, how are you?

Mr. Witt. I'm fine, sir. We have a lot of State directors in the room, probably about 200 people here, and we're very appreciative for you to call in.

The President. Well, I'm delighted to do it, and I wish I were there with you.

Mr. Witt. We do, too. [Laughter]

The President. You haven't seen Washington today—it just depends—I wish I were there

with you even more than you wish I were there. [Laughter]

Let me begin by saying that I can imagine that for many of you, having the chance to come to the conference is a welcome relief from being out there on the front lines of disasters in your home States. This has been a tough, a cold, a wet, even a miserable winter for people in a lot of places and many of you are still in response or early recovery from the floods and the blizzards. We also, as I'm sure you know, have these terrible fires in some parts of our country. We've had more than 3 times as many disasters declared in the first 6 weeks of this

year than in this same period in the past 20 years.

I was recently in Oregon, Idaho, Washington, and Pennsylvania to see the devastation, the ruined homes, the businesses, as a result of the recent flooding. And I got a chance to talk with people who have lost their homes and their belongings and literally have to start all over again. I couldn't have known it when I became President, but I suppose that I've seen the widest array of natural disasters, along with James Lee Witt, in the last 3 years as in any period—comparable period—in modern history. We had the great Midwest flood of '93, the Northridge earthquake, the Oklahoma City bombing, Hurricanes Opal and Marilyn, dozens of floods and tornadoes, and of course, these fires.

I did know, though, when I became President that this was an important part of my job. When I became President I promised myself, based on my own experience as a Governor and my own frustrations with FEMA, that I would improve the Nation's response to disasters. For many years FEMA had been regarded almost universally as an agency not up to the job. And I'm very proud that under James Lee Witt's management and with all of your help, FEMA is now a model disaster relief agency and, in some corners, thought to be by far the most successful part of the Federal Government today. That is a breathtaking turnaround in just 3 years.

If I could just give one example: It used to take a month or more for many people to begin receiving relief, and now people can call in to a 1-800 number and see those checks arrive within days.

I am very pleased with the progress that's been made. I also am more impressed than ever before about the importance, the integral importance of FEMA to the Nation's business. It now relates to the Transportation Department, the Department of Health and Human Services, the Labor Department, the Energy Department, right across the line because of all of us having to work with James Lee in the dealing with disasters. So today it's a pleasure for me to announce to all of you that I am extending Cabinet membership for the first time in history to FEMA and to James Lee Witt.

Mr. Witt. Thank you, sir.

The President. Let me also say that I think all of us know that in dealing with these disasters, the most important thing is the spirit of the people. I'll never forget when James Lee and I were in Woodland, Washington, a few days ago. We came upon a 70-year-old man, and he and his wife had lost everything in the flood. He had even lost his hearing aid. And he looked at me and he said, "Well, I'm 70 years old, and I've never had a President shake hands with me before. It was nearly worth losing my home to do that at my age." [Laughter]

And I thought to myself, I wished that spirit could kind of somehow capture America. And at the end of my visit with this man he said to me how grateful he was for the help he'd received, how grateful he was for everyone treating him as they had. And then he said, "It's just too bad that we don't behave this way toward each other all the time." And I think that's an important lesson that we could take out of the work that FEMA and all of you have done. The teamwork, the spirit of can-do, the openness to doing what has to be done, the total lack of cynicism that you see in the midst of a disaster and taking care of its aftermath, that's really what this country needs all day, every day. When America works together, we never lose, and if we don't, we beat ourselves.

So I want to say again to all of you how grateful I am to you. I know the American people look to you, your Governors, to James Lee, and to me when they need us in these disasters. I know that they rise to the challenges they rarely do on a daily basis when a disaster occurs. And I just want to tell you how grateful I am to you for your public service and how I want to encourage you to continue to imbue the spirit of service that you demonstrate in times of disasters every day, every week, all year long.

Congratulations for all the good work you do. Have a successful conference, and let's hope and pray that for the rest of this year you won't have quite so much to do as you have had in the beginning.

Thank you, and God bless you.

NOTE: The President spoke at 11:24 a.m. by telephone from the Oval Office at the White House to the association meeting in Arlington, VA.