

## Remarks at a Reception for the Congressional Medal of Honor Society in Little Rock

September 25, 1997

Thank you very much, Secretary Gober, President Bucha, Mayor Dailey, Mayor Hays, Senator Beebe. Governor McMath, it's wonderful to see you here tonight, sir.

I thank Secretary Gober for his introduction. It was overly generous but a good illustration of Clinton's first law of politics: Whenever possible, try to have yourself introduced by someone you have appointed to high office. [*Laughter*] Did you hear the story Secretary Gober said about he was in the Army, then he was in the Marine Corps, and his wife was in the Navy and then the Air Force. They're the only people I ever knew who organized a 30-year campaign to be Secretary of Veterans Affairs. [*Laughter*] It worked. He has done a wonderful job.

And thank you, Secretary Togo West, for the job you do for the United States Army, sir. I'd also like to thank the United States Military Academy Cadet Glee Club. I thought they did a terrific job. Go ahead and give them a hand. [*Applause*] And I think we can forgive them if there was just a little more zip in the Army song than the others. [*Laughter*] That, after all, is befitting.

Ladies and gentlemen, I am honored to be here with you. I thank you for coming to my native State. I hope you have enjoyed it. I'm especially honored to be in the presence of people who are in what has been described as the most exclusive club in America, the Congressional Medal of Honor Society. Along with every other American, I feel a profound admiration for all of you for your acts of valor and heroism. I am especially gratified that several who wear the medal and who are in this room tonight are my fellow Arkansans, including Nick Bacon, director of veterans affairs here; Scooter Burke; Clarence Kraft; and Nathan Gordon.

No one could live in this country for very long without being especially impressed with how genuinely patriotic most of our fellow citizens are. We are a nation of immigrants, proud of our roots, proud of what is distinctive about us, but there's an extraordinary amount of love in this country for our Nation, felt by almost every single citizen.

Indeed, there's so much love in our country that, as you know, we very often have people join the United States military even before they're naturalized as citizens. I never will forget, when we welcomed the Pope to Denver for the first time and I was escorting His Holiness down the line of all the well-wishers there at Regis University, we got to a young man in a United States Army uniform, and he broke into this elaborate conversation with the Pope in Polish. And I thought to myself, we could have had a Haitian-American speaking to the Pope in Creole; we could have spoken to the Pope in Spanish and Chinese and Japanese and any number of languages in the world. This is the only country in the world where you can say that. When we turned back the dictators and restored the duly elected leaders in Haiti, America was the only country in the world where we were able to send 200 United States citizen soldiers to Haiti who spoke the native language, Creole. But we are united by this almost mystical love of our country and its history and what it means.

Nonetheless, we know that in every generation there will be a few who stand out, who are called upon to do things of such selfless heroism that their patriotism shines above all the others.

Twice since I have been President, I have bestowed the Medal of Honor. First, very sadly, to Master Sergeant Gary Gordon and Sergeant First Class Randall Shughart posthumously, two men who bravely lost their lives in Somalia trying to save the lives of their fellow soldiers. Then, this year, because so much time had passed, a much happier occasion: Fifty years after the fact, we recognized seven African-American heroes of World War II who were prepared to sacrifice everything for our freedom, even though they didn't have full freedom when they came back home. That was a wonderful day.

One painful, one wonderful, I will never forget either one, because both of them were examples of the truly extraordinary heroism which all of you who wear this medal have demonstrated in your service. When the battle was

darkest, when the fortunes of war often favored an unforgiving enemy, somehow those of you who won the Medal of Honor and who earned the Medal of Honor found the strength, the will to fight more valiantly and turn the tide, to save the lives of your comrades, to save the day for America.

Your president spoke a moment ago about the event we commemorated at Little Rock Central High School. Forty years ago, something happened here that none of us who are native to this State are especially proud of. Our former Governor, Governor McMath, who also was a major general in the Marine Corps, tried to stop it. And I'll always be grateful to him. But in the end, those children were not denied admission to our high school, because the law of the land said we were all created equal. A Federal court issued an order to carry out the law, and the President of the United States and the Attorney General of the United States and the 101st Airborne Division of the United States Army did exactly that, and they stood up for the Constitution. They were heroes in that day, as well.

And somehow I think it's fitting that you are here on this day, and we can celebrate your heroism, and you can participate in a moment of unique citizen heroism in the history of America. Think what it was like for those nine kids to show up and face a jeering mob, armed only with their notebooks and their schoolbooks. Think what it was like for their parents to send them into the storm not knowing whether they would come home.

But if you look at the whole history of America, and if you look at the whole history of our military services, we see an unbroken chain in the continuing struggle to make our historic commitment to freedom and equality more real in each succeeding generation.

Every American knows about our military's vital role in protecting our national interest and our values around the world. But the Armed Forces also has reflected and protected our values here at home. Our military promotes equality by rewarding merit without regard to race or gender and sets an example for every American and for every American institution where two or more people work together.

And as I said, you cannot talk to any person who was alive and well in Little Rock 40 years ago who doesn't remember that it was the Army paratroopers who ultimately stood as a bulwark of protection for those nine little children, who were there for them because their President ordered them to stand up for the law of the land here at home.

So I hope that you will always remember, throughout all your conventions and all your meetings, that you happened to come to Little Rock on a special day for America and a special day for America's military, a special example of personal patriotism and bravery by civilians, and that all of us—all of us—are profoundly grateful that you're here, for your valor and your sacrifice, for being there when your country needed you the most.

Thank you for what you have done, and thank you, too, for what you continue to do as living examples of everything we love most about America.

God bless you.

NOTE: The President spoke at 8:44 p.m. at the Aerospace Education Center. In his remarks, he referred to Paul Bucha, president, Congressional Medal of Honor Society; Mayor Jim Dailey of Little Rock; Mayor Patrick Henry Hays of North Little Rock; State Senator Mike Beebe; former Arkansas Governor Sid McMath; and Mary Lou Keener, wife of Secretary of Veterans Affairs Hershel Gober.

## Statement Urging House of Representatives Action on Campaign Finance Reform

September 25, 1997

I am greatly encouraged by the statements calling for House action on campaign finance reform legislation made earlier today by Demo-

cratic Leader Gephardt, and yesterday by House Majority Leader Arney. I applaud these two