

Presentation of the National Medal  
of the Arts

and the National Humanities Medal  
Washington, DC

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PHOTOCOPY  
PRESERVATION

THE WHITE HOUSE

Office of the Press Secretary

For Immediate Release

September 29, 1999

REMARKS BY THE PRESIDENT  
AT PRESENTATION OF THE NATIONAL MEDAL OF THE ARTS  
AND THE NATIONAL HUMANITIES MEDAL

Constitution Hall  
Washington, D.C.

12:55 P.M. EDT

THE PRESIDENT: Thank you very much. Thank you so much, ladies and gentlemen. Welcome. I want to welcome all of our honorees here -- Bill Ivey and all the people from the National Endowment for the Humanities; Bill Ferris and all the people from the National Endowment for the Arts; the people from Library and Museum Services; members of Congress. I have seen Senator Wellstone and Congressman Houghton, Representative Morella and Nadler. There may be others here.

I want to thank the people of our shared homeland, the Irish Band and the Step Dancers, for doing such a wonderful job today. I thought they were great. (Applause.) If George Mitchell doesn't get us over the final hump in the last steps of the Irish peace process, I may just send them back until everybody is smiling so much they can't think of anything other than ending the conflict. (Laughter.)

I'd also like to thank the wonderful strings from the Marine Corps for doing such a great job for us here today. (Applause.)

In one of his final speeches, President Kennedy said he looked forward to an America which rewards achievement in the arts as we reward achievement in business; an America which commands respect throughout the world not only for its strength, but for its civilization. Today we recognize an extraordinary group of Americans who have strengthened our civilization and whose achievements have enriched our lives -- through the songs they sing, the stories they tell, the books they write, the art they shape, the gifts they share.

Eighteen women and men, one educational institution, all having defined in their own unique ways a part of who we are as a people and what we're about as a nation as we enter a new century in a new millennium.

First I present the National Medal of the Arts winners.

Irene Diamond, one of America's leading patrons of the arts, has dedicated her life to discovery. As an early Hollywood talent scout, she discovered Burt Lancaster and Robert Redford. For that alone, some people think she should get this award. (Laughter and applause.)

As one of the movie industry's first female story editors, she discovered the script that became "Casablanca." I believe when the film industry issued its list of 100 greatest films, "Casablanca" only ranked second, Irene, but some of us voted for it number one. (Laughter.)

As the President of the Aaron Diamond Foundation, she helped fuel the path-breaking research that led to the discovery of protease inhibitors, which are now helping people with HIV lead longer and healthier lives. As a generous supporter of the arts, she has given more than \$70 million to help more Americans discover the magic of theater, dance and song.

It has been said that discovery consists of seeing what everyone has seen, and thinking what no one has thought. We are all far richer for the vision, the insight, and the discoveries of this most precious Diamond. (Applause.)

Colonel, read the citation.

(The citation is read.) (Applause.)

THE PRESIDENT: The Reverend C.L. Franklin, then pastor of Detroit's New Bethel Baptist Church, was a powerfully emotional preacher. But one Sunday in 1954, it was the heavenly voice of a 12-year-old that brought the congregation to its feet. The voice belonged to his own daughter, Aretha, the woman now idolized throughout the world as the Queen of Soul.

No matter where she has traveled, she has never left behind the sound of those Sundays in church. You could hear it ranging over four full octaves when she sang Dr. King to Heaven, and in electrifying performances at our Inaugural celebrations. You can hear it in every one of her nearly 50 albums, and I am so grateful that she has allowed me to hear it time after time here at the White House.

Aretha's voice once was designated a natural resource of the State of Michigan. (Laughter.) She will probably never know how many people whose lives she has enriched, whose hearts she has lifted, how many people she gave a spring in the step that would not have been there, and brought sunshine to a rainy day and tenderness to a hardened heart.

Today, we honor her for all she has given with the magnificent talent God gave her.

Colonel, read the citation.

(The citation is read.) (Applause.)

THE PRESIDENT: Michael Graves is a rare individual who finds equal wonder in things both large and small. As one of our century's most important designers and architects, he has said he gets as much pleasure planning a large building as he does designing a spatula. (Laughter.)

So it's little wonder that Michael Graves' work can be found from our shopping malls to our National Mall. From an award-winning office building to a tea kettle; to the creative scaffolding around the Washington Monument -- which, I might say, has enriched the lives of every person in Washington, D.C. -- (applause) -- and made those often stuck in what is now America's most crowded traffic patterned city have their time pass a little better, Michael Graves has created art that surrounds our lives.

He calls himself a great practitioner, but in some ways his challenge is more daunting than that of a physician. As Frank Lloyd Wright once said, "After all, the doctor can bury his mistake," -- (laughter) -- "but the architect can only advise his client to plant vines." (Laughter.) The only thing that grows and covers Michael Graves' work is our admiration, appreciation and respect.

Colonel, read the citation.

(The citation is read.) (Applause.)

THE PRESIDENT: When it comes to training in the performing arts, the Juilliard School stands alone. Juilliard has cultivated the genius of artists of world renown. We hear it in the flawless voice of Leontyne Price; in the virtuoso violin of Itzhak Perlman; the narrative jazz of Wynton Marsalis; the uninhibited humor of Robin Williams.

But Juilliard does more than develop the skills of gifted artists. It instills in every student the obligation to share that talent with others -- through performances in hospitals, nursing homes, hundreds of free shows every year at the Lincoln Center.

In honoring the artist in society, Juilliard opens the doors of art to the world. We honor it today for all it has done, and all it will do, in taking the best and making them even better.

I'd like to ask Dr. Joe Polisi, the President of the Juilliard School, to come forward, and I'd like to ask the Colonel to read the citation.

(The citation is read.) (Applause.)

THE PRESIDENT: Norman Lear has held up a mirror to American society and changed the way we look at it. From Archie Bunker's living room in Queens to Fred Sanford's junkyard in Watts, he has employed the power of humor in the service of human understanding. His departure from traditional, two-dimensional television characters was risky. It showed the enormous respect he has for the judgment, the sense and the heart of the American people.

He gave us something real. He tackled issues head on.

Archie Bunker, after all, was the best argument against his own bigotry. By laying it out unvarnished, Norman Lear took it apart and, in the process, made us laugh out loud. His commitment to promoting understanding and tolerance extends far beyond the screen. As founder of People for the American Way and The Business Enterprise Trust, he continues his work to deepen freedom, defend liberties and reward social responsibility.

The first time I ever met Norman Lear was in early 1981, shortly after the presidential election of 1980, in which I became the youngest former governor in American history. (Laughter.) Norman Lear invited me to come talk about a project with him in New York, and he took me to a play on Broadway that he produced. We went to opening night. It closed three days later. (Laughter.) We are here today because the intervening years have been kinder to both of us. (Laughter and applause.) I'm not sure Archie Bunker would approve, but Meathead would be proud and so are we.

Colonel, read the citation.

(The citation is read.) (Applause.)

THE PRESIDENT: When she was seven, Rosetta LeNoire broke both her legs -- actually, doctors broke them for her. She was born with rickets; it was the only way the bones could grow in place. Her godfather, Bill "Bojangles" Robinson, said that dancing could strengthen her legs and took her on the road.

She moved on to success -- Broadway, film and, of course, television, where we remember her as Mother Winslow on "Family Matters" and Nell Carter's mother on "Give Me A Break." But with all her talent and drive through the years, discrimination was never far behind. So Rosetta did more than dream of a theater with no color bar, she actually built one.

For more than 30 years, the AMAS Musical Theater in New York City has been a place where performers are judged by the caliber of their skills, not the color of their skin. As a courageous child, Rosetta learned that sometimes you have to break things to put them in the right place. Today, America thanks her for breaking barriers to set our nation right.

Colonel, read the citation.

(The citation is read.) (Applause.)

THE PRESIDENT: In 1967, Harvey Lichtenstein was given an impossible task -- to breathe life into the Brooklyn Academy of Music, a neighborhood relic, on the verge of being razed for tennis courts. Not only did he save the academy, he turned it into one of the most important avant garde institutions in the entire world.

In his 32 years as a charismatic impresario, visionary and father of the Brooklyn Academy of Music, he sparked the stunning careers of Twyla Tharp, Philip Glass, Mark Morris, so many others Manhattan had overlooked. He launched the wonderful new Next Wave festival and the BAM Opera. He proved that art challenges can also be wildly popular.

He truly changed the way we think. Although he just made his curtain call at the Brooklyn Academy, we know he will continue to be New York's stellar steward of the arts.

Colonel, read the citation.

(The citation is read.) (Applause.)

**THE PRESIDENT:** Lydia Mendoza's unique musical career spans most of the entire course of the 20th century. She recorded her first song in a San Antonio hotel room in 1928. More than 70 years and 1,000 songs later, her legacy is as wide and deep as the Rio Grande valley.

Lydia learned much from the oral tradition of Mexican music that her mother and grandmother shared with her. In turn, she shared it with the world, becoming the first rural American woman performer to garner a large following throughout Latin America.

With the artistry of her voice and the gift of her songs, she bridged the gap between generations and cultures. Lydia Mendoza is a true American pioneer and she paved the way for a whole new generation of Latino performers, who today are making all Americans sing.

Colonel, read the citation.

(The citation is read.) (Applause.)

**THE PRESIDENT:** In late 1949, in the coffee houses of San Francisco, a young, classically-trained singer named Odetta fell in love with folk music and found her true voice. Soon she began recording unforgettably soulful albums and touring the world's great stages. In the words of one early admirer, "She has such a strong voice and presence that I am left with the irreverent, but irresistible feeling that if she had been the captain of the Titanic, the ship would not have sunk." (Laughter.)

For 50 years now Odetta has used her commanding power and amazing grace not just to entertain, but to inspire. She has sung for freedom with Dr. King, lifted the pride of millions of children, shaped the careers of young performers like Joan Baez, Bob Dylan and Tracey Chapman. She is the reigning queen of American folk music, reminding us all that songs have the power to change the heart and change the world.

Colonel, read the citation.

(The citation is read.) (Applause.)

**THE PRESIDENT:** It started out as just another odd job for this aspiring artist -- researching the artistic possibilities of plaster used to cast broken bones. "I had my wife cover me head to foot in the stuff," he said. "Once it dried, I broke out of it, breaking the mold in the

process. Then I put it back together. It was white, spectral, full of elusive potential -- just what I had been after."

George Segal's art may be inanimate, but more than a few of us have had to look twice just to be sure. (Laughter.) His silent creations speak volumes about the human condition and give life to the spaces where they are displayed. His sculptures at the Franklin Roosevelt Memorial of the Depression bread line and the fireside chat transport us back to the that time and place.

Through all of his work, George Segal has brought elegance to the everyday and mystery to the commonplace. Decades after his first experiments with plaster, he continues to break the mold.

Colonel, read the citation.

(The citation is read.) (Applause.)

THE PRESIDENT: George Balanchine once told audiences not to analyze ballet. "Words cannot describe it," he said, "you cannot explain a flower." So it's impossible to explain the radiance and grace of Maria Tallchief.

She leapt from Oklahoma's Osage Indian territory to the center stages of the world. Her partnership with Balanchine transformed the ballet world for the ages. She was his inspiration for the title role in "The Firebird." She was the first sugarplum fairy.

A reviewer once said that hers will always be the story of ballet conquering America -- but also, I would add, the story of America conquering ballet.

Maria Tallchief took what had been a European art form, and made it America's own. How fitting that a Native American woman would do that. With magic, mystery and style, she soared above all.

Colonel, read the citation.

(The citation is read.) (Applause.)

THE PRESIDENT: And now, ladies and gentlemen, for the National Humanities Medals.

Patricia Battin is saving history. The high acidic content of paper threatens to destroy millions of old books, but she has led the national campaign to raise awareness about this challenge and preserve the genius of the past.

As the first President of the Commission on Preservation and Access, she has helped to spur America's libraries and archives to transfer information from so-called "brittle books" to microfilm and optical disks. As a result, more than 770,000 books have already been preserved. She's also one of our nation's leading authorities on changing learning patterns of the digital age. From 19th century books to 21st century technology, Patricia Battin is strengthening our storehouse of knowledge for the future.

Thank you for saving the knowledge of the past for the children of tomorrow.

Colonel, read the citation.

(The citation is read.) (Applause.)

THE PRESIDENT: When it comes to the struggle for peace, justice and freedom, Taylor Branch literally has written the book. With vivid prose and clear-eyed detail, his two volumes on the Martin Luther King years recount a man and a movement that changed America for good. As Taylor has said, "It is really the story of ordinary people who took risks to enlarge freedom. And we have a much better country for it."

Those aren't just Taylor Branch's words; they also reflect his life. Growing up in segregated Atlanta, Taylor Branch saw discrimination everywhere he looked. But through it all, he also saw something else -- an America where we heal our racial wounds, celebrate our differences, and move forward together.

We grew up in the same sort of South, affected by the limits, the longing and the language of race, in all of its myriad manifestations. I met Taylor Branch 30 years ago this month. I knew then he was a remarkable young man. And I must tell you, I am very proud of the gifts he has given America in the years since.

In an early sermon, Dr. King said, "After one has discovered what he is made for, he should seek to do it so well that no one could do it better." Anyone who has read the work of Taylor Branch knows, no one does it better.

Colonel, read the citation.

(The citation is read.) (Applause.)

THE PRESIDENT: More than two decades ago, Jacquelyn Dowd Hall explained to an elderly woman why she wanted to tape her memories. After listening closely to all of Professor Hall's words, the senior citizen looked up and said, "I understand. You don't have to be famous for your life to be history." That became the motto of the Southern Oral History Program directed by Jacquelyn Dowd Hall, and the rest is truly history.

The program, centered at the University of North Carolina, rings with the voices of mill workers who have lost their jobs, civil rights leaders marching for freedom, ordinary folks building their communities. And I might add, there is a young person from Arkansas by the name of Clinton whose voice is on one of those tapes who was on the verge of something really big -- losing his first election. (Laughter.)

Anyone who grew up in the South knows that no book can capture the color and the vibrancy you hear in the everyday conversations on Main Street, in general stores, on the front porches and the back yards. So all of us, whether we are from the South or not, can say thank you, Jacquelyn Dowd Hall, for capturing that unique and wonderful voice, for recording history through the lives of ordinary people, and, in so doing, for making history.

Colonel, read the citation.

(The citation is read.) (Applause.)

THE PRESIDENT: He was born in Anoka, Minnesota, but we know him as the man from Lake Wobegon. A town with a name derived, he tells us, from the Native American phrase meaning, "we sat in the rain all day waiting for you." (Laughter.) A place, he confesses, settled by pioneers who had stopped a little short, having misread their map, but refused to admit it. (Laughter.) Well, Garrison Keillor has never stopped short. Just ask the governor of Minnesota. (Laughter.)

Millions of listeners plan their weekends around his "Prairie Home Companion." It's always blaring on the radio in the White House. No one wants to miss a minute of his homespun humor, homegrown music and stories of hometown America. And he never leaves it behind.

Today when I shook hands with Garrison he said, well, I understand that you had a cancellation and had to put me in at the last minute. (Laughter.) I didn't have the heart to tell him how sorry I was that Rush Limbaugh couldn't make it today. (Laughter and applause.)

With imagination and wit, but also with a steel-trap mind and deep conviction, Garrison Keillor has brought us together, and constantly reminds us how we're all connected and how it ought to keep us a little humble.

We all have a little Lake Wobegon in us, and our homes will always have a place for Garrison Keillor, our modern-day Mark Twain.

Colonel, read the citation.

(The citation is read.) (Applause.)

THE PRESIDENT: While studying to be a newspaperman in a small Texas town, Jim Lehrer worked nights at a bus depot, calling out departures and arrivals over a microphone. You might say that's what he had to do for politicians after he assumed his position on television. (Laughter.) He learned to speak clearly, be polite, stick to the facts -- traits that would become his signature style as one of the most respected and beloved figures in American broadcast journalism.

When sound bites and sensationalism began taking over TV news in the early 1970s, he teamed up with broadcaster Robin MacNeil to start a nightly newscast that offered the opposite: long, in-depth stories and interviews on the serious topics of the day. A show where guests are treated as guests; viewers are treated as intelligent; viewpoints are treated with respect.

Novelist; playwright; journalist; moderator of presidential debates; asker of hard and probing questions -- (laughter) -- in a deceptively civilized way -- (laughter) -- Jim Lehrer is a modern man of letters who has left us a gift of professionalism and civility, of true learning and the enlargement of our citizenship by his work.

Colonel, read the citation

(The citation is read.) (Applause.)

THE PRESIDENT: John Rawls is perhaps the greatest political philosopher of the 20th century. In 1971, when Hillary and I were in law school, we were among the millions moved by a remarkable books he wrote, "A Theory of Justice," that placed our rights to liberty and justice upon a strong and brilliant new foundation of reason.

Almost singlehandedly, John Rawls revived the disciplines of political and ethical philosophy with his argument that a society in which the most fortunate helped the least fortunate is not only a moral society, but a logical one. Just as impressively, he has helped a whole generation of learned Americans revive their faith in democracy itself.

Ladies and gentlemen, Margaret Rawls will accept the medal on behalf of her husband.

Colonel, read the citation.

(The citation is read.) (Applause.)

THE PRESIDENT: Any time we look at all that Steven Spielberg has managed to create on film, we know that that is what God put him here to do. Like Orson Wells, he was a true cinematic prodigy. He shot his first movies at the age of 12. By the ripe old age of 35, he was already one of our most gifted story tellers, with "Close Encounters," "Raiders of the Lost Ark" and "E.T."

But when his insatiable moral and imaginative hunger drove him to create such resident masterpieces as "Schindler's List," one of the most important movies of the 20th century, and the remarkable, "Saving Private Ryan," we saw that he was an astonishing historian, as well.

On top of his creative mastery, Steven has devoted enormous time and resources to preserving Holocaust testimonies, supporting righteous causes, unleashing the power of entertainment and technology to help seriously ill children to heal.

Steven Spielberg could have gotten the National Medal of the Arts, but I think he would want most to be remembered for his contributions to humanity. I also want to thank him for all the many times that he and Kate and their wonderful children have enriched our lives, and all the things he tells me that keep me thinking.

Today I was talking to Steven and he said, how are you, and I said, I'm doing pretty good for an older guy. He said, yes, but did you see that article that says that our children, certainly our grandchildren, will live to be 150? And I got to thinking that -- Hillary talked Steven into making the movie that we will show at the American Millennial Celebration on the Mall on New Year's Eve, as we see the turning of the millennium. And Steven has agreed to create this 18-minute movie of the century -- 100 years in 18 minutes, so we'll feel like we're 150. (Laughter.) He always finds a way to make it work.

Colonel, read the citation.

(The citation is read.) (Applause.)

THE PRESIDENT: Long before "Fences," before "Seven Guitars," before "Two Trains Running," before his two Pulitzers, August Wilson wrote an essay. He was in high

school, and his teacher refused to believe that a black student could have produced something that good. Disgusted by the low expectations of his teacher, August Wilson took refuge in the library. This is what he said: "I found books by black writers, and realized I could do that. I could have a book, on a shelf."

From the dimly lit library stacks to the bright lights of the stage, he has chronicled the African American experience throughout the 20th century -- decade by decade -- with epic plays of dreams and doubts, humor and heartbreak, mystery and music.

Years ago, August Wilson asked a friend and fellow writer, how do you make your characters talk? His friend replied, "You don't; you listen to them." America is richer for the listening voice, and the landmark drama of August Wilson.

Colonel, read the citation.

(The citation is read.) (Applause.)

**THE PRESIDENT:** Ladies and gentlemen, we thank you for sharing in this celebration and being a part of this last Arts and Humanities Awards Ceremony of the 20th century. On behalf of our nation, I thank our honorees for all they have done for us, and I thank you all for supporting their work, for helping to shape our society, lift our spirits, expand our boundaries and share our gifts with the world.

Thank you and goodbye. Thank you. (Applause.)

END

1:42 P.M. EDT

THE WHITE HOUSE

Office of the Press Secretary

For Immediate Release

September 29, 1999

REMARKS BY THE PRESIDENT  
AT NATIONAL MEDAL OF THE ARTS AND HUMANITIES DINNER

The State Dining Room

8:40 P.M. EDT

THE PRESIDENT: Ladies and gentlemen, welcome to the White House. A special welcome to all of our honorees of the National Medals of Arts and Humanities. The nice thing about this evening, apart from being here in America's House slightly before we celebrate its 200th birthday, is that there are no speeches and lots of entertainment -- (laughter) -- unless, of course, Mr. Keillor wants to substitute for me at this moment. (Laughter.) I'll be living down that crack I made about him for the rest of my life. (Laughter.)

I want to say again, as I did today and as Hillary did, that this is one of the most enjoyable and important days of every year to us, because it gives America a chance to recognize our sons and daughters who have enriched our lives, made us laugh, made us think, made us cry, lifted us up when we were down. In so many ways, all of you have touched so many people that you will never know. But in all of them accumulated, you have made America a better place, you've made the world a finer place.

And as we look to the new century, I hope that as time goes on we will be known more and more for things beyond our wealth and power, that go to the wealth and power of our spirit. Insofar as that happens, it will be because of you and people like you. And it was a privilege for all of us to honor you today.

I would like to ask all of you here to join me in a toast to the 1999 winners of the Medal of Arts and the Medal of Humanities.

(A toast is offered.)

And welcome. Thank you.

END

8:44 P.M. EDT- -