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Medal of Freedom Ceremony

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Remarks by First Lady Hillary Rodham Clinton

The White House
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Thank you all – and welcome to the White House. (inaudible) to have you here. You know, there are many things that I and the President are going to miss about living and being part of the White House's life. But none more than this ceremony which means so much to our sense of history and our sense of citizenship. Today is a very special occasion. All of the 15 extraordinary citizens who are receiving the Presidential Medal of Freedom have not only earned our highest civilian honor, but also the gratitude of every single American. And it is a wonderful selection of people who you will meet in a more personal way when the President introduces each of them.

I also want to acknowledge that we have many members of the President's Cabinet here including Secretary Albright, Secretary Cohen, Acting Secretary Guber, Secretary Herman, Attorney General Reno, Secretary Riley, Secretary Slater, Secretary Shalala, and Secretary Summers. We also have Director LaChance and Administrator Alvarez. We have members of Congress including Senator Tom Daschle and Congressman Jim McGovern and, of course, Senator Moynihan, who is here as a recipient himself, along with Senator Lincoln Chafee and Congressman Jesse Jackson, Jr. who are here as the proud sons of awardees. And there are many members of the honorees' families and friends and colleagues over lifetimes who are in the East Room today, and I thank you all for being here.

The history of these medals dates back to the days of, first, President Truman, who, in 1945, wanted to recognize service in war time. And then later, President Kennedy, who expanded their scope to honor distinguished civilians who gave service to their country in peacetime. He announced the very first recipients on Independence Day in 1963, but, tragically, never lived to give the awards himself.

In explaining why President Kennedy created this Presidential Medal of Freedom with the help and advice, I might add, of Senator Moynihan, President Johnson said, "Our glory is peace, not war. Our greatness is in people, not power. Our genius for 188 years has been the excellence of individuals."

These 15 citizens receiving the Medal today continue that proud tradition. I know that there are many firsts in this crowd of wonderful citizens about to receive this medal including one of my first bosses, Marion Wright Edelman of the Children's Defense Fund, and one of my first political bosses, George McGovern. In the 1972 Presidential campaign - Sargeant Shriver is here somewhere with a McGovern/Shriver button on. You'll probably see him... We are so pleased to have all of you here with us.

It is my great honor to introduce the President who really looks forward to this day and really understands what this medal represents not only to people in this country

but to people living around the world because it is called the Medal of Freedom which of course is a singular call to action for our country here as it always has been. The people that the President will be introducing have helped to lead us through changing times, helped to redefine the scope and extend the meaning of freedom, helped to really enshrine our most cherished values. They've stood up for children and for workers, for those left behind on the outskirts of opportunity, plagued by violence or hatred or discrimination. Day in and day out, they have widened our horizons, opened our minds and our hearts.

It is my great privilege now to introduce to you the President of the United States, Bill Clinton.