



William Jefferson Clinton

Address on Presenting Congressional Medal of Honor to Rosa Parks



Delivered 15 June 1999, Washington, D.C.

AUTHENTICITY CERTIFIED: Text version below transcribed directly from audio

Mr. Speaker, Mr. Gephardt, Senator Daschle, Representative Carson, Senator Abraham, Representative Clyburn, Representative Watts -- to all the members of the House and the Senate here, and those not here, who supported this resolution, I thank you for what you have done -- Dr. Ogilvie, Dr. Ford, Reverend Jackson, members of the Cabinet and the civil rights community who are here -- Dr. Height.

I'd like to say a special word of welcome to two members of the Little Rock Nine who came here to honor Rosa Parks -- Minnie Jean Brown Trickey and Robert Jefferson -- welcome to you.

I want to thank the Howard University Gospel Choir and the incomparable Jessye Norman for their wonderful, wonderful music.

The previous speakers have spoken with great power, eloquence, and truth. In less than 200 days now, we will mark the end of another century. They have told you the story of one brave woman, and the ripples of impact she had upon all the millions of people who live in the United States. It is, in many ways, the quintessential story of the 20th Century -- a time with trials and tribulations which still, fundamentally, is the story of the triumph of freedom -- of democracy over dictatorship, free enterprise over state socialism, of tolerance over bigotry.

It was a fight waged on the beaches of Normandy, on the islands of the South Pacific, at Checkpoint Charlie, behind the Iron Curtain, and countless known and unknown, large and small villages, across the globe. Here, at home, the fight waged in classrooms, lunch counters, and on public buses in the segregated South.



AmericanRhetoric.com

For us, what has always been at stake is whether we could keep moving on that stony road, closer to the ideals of our Founders -- whether we really could be a country where we are all equal, not only endowed by our Creator with -- but in fact living with -- the rights to life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness.

Forty-four years ago, Rosa Parks reminded us all that we were a long way from those ideals; that for millions of Americans, our history was full of weary years -- our sweet land of liberty bearing only bitter fruit and silent tears. And so she sat, anchored to that seat, as Dr. King said, "by the accumulated indignities of days gone by, and the countless aspirations of generations yet unborn."

Rosa Parks said, "I didn't get on that bus to get arrested. I got on that bus to go home." In so many ways, Rosa Parks brought America home, to our Founders' dream.

You know, when we look across the history of the civil rights movement, we celebrate President Lincoln and the Congress of that era for the Constitutional amendments. We celebrate William Lloyd Garrison and Frederick Douglass. In our own period, we celebrate President Eisenhower and sending the troops to Little Rock, the commitment of John and Robert Kennedy, the magnificent legislative achievements of President Johnson and that Congress -- reaching across party lines.

But we know that in a funny way, people who have no position or money and have only the power of their courage and character are always there before the political leaders. We know that.

When Rosa Parks got on that bus in Alabama, I was a nine-year-old boy, living in Arkansas, going to segregated schools, riding public buses every single day, where all the colored people sat in the back. My family got a television when I was nine years old, just a few months before it became worldwide news that Mrs. Parks had gotten on the bus. I thought it was a pretty good deal, and so did my friends. And we couldn't figure out anything we could do, since we couldn't even vote. So, we began to sit on the back of the bus when we got on.

It seems like -- I say this now -- this is a little thing. I say it only to say we must never, ever -- when this ceremony is over -- forget about the power of ordinary people to stand in the fire for the cause of human dignity, and to touch the hearts of people that have almost turned to stone.

I thank the Congress for honoring Rosa Parks. I was honored, Rosa, to give you the Medal of Freedom, and I was thrilled during the State of the Union Address when you got that enormous, bipartisan ovation here. But remember, my fellow Americans, freedom's work is never done. There are still people who are discriminated against. There are still people who because of their human condition are looked down on, derided, degraded, demeaned, and we should all remember the powerful example of this one citizen. And those of us with greater authority and power should attempt every day, in every way, to follow her lead.

God bless you, Mrs. Parks, and God bless America.