

Congratulations, *mi amigo*.

Each of these gentlemen we honor today has his own style and personality, and each has amassed distinctions and achievements that belong to him alone. Yet all of them have shown a firm adherence to the principles of freedom and democratic values and a willingness to face problems squarely instead of passing them on to others. They're the sort of guys who look you in the eye and tell you the truth and keep their word. In lengthy service they proved to be leaders of character and fortitude. They are warm friends of the United States of America. The opportunity to know them and work with them has been among the great satisfactions of my time as President. I respect them, and I admire them.

And now I ask the military aide to read the citations, and it will be my honor to present the Presidential Medal of Freedom to Tony Blair, John Howard, Alvaro Uribe.

[*Lt. Cmdr. Clay Beers, USN, Navy Aide to the President, read the citations, and the President presented the medals.*]

The President. In honor of these distinguished gentlemen, Laura and I invite you to stay for a reception in the State Dining Room. Please enjoy yourselves, and thank you for joining us here at the White House.

NOTE: The President spoke at 1:07 p.m. in the East Room at the White House. In his remarks, he referred to former President Vaclav Havel of the Czech Republic; President Ellen Johnson Sirleaf of Liberia; former President Nelson Mandela of South Africa; and Marc Gonsalves, Thomas Howes, and Keith Stansell, former hostages held by the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC). The Office of the Press Secretary also released a Spanish language transcript of these remarks.

Statement on the Situation in Cuba

January 13, 2009

As much of the world celebrates the dawning of a new year, Cuba marks 50 years of one of the cruelest dictatorships this hemisphere has witnessed.

To those who yearn for liberty, all is not lost. The world has witnessed other instances of dictatorship, but has ultimately seen those

regimes fall and formerly enslaved countries embrace their birthright of freedom. One day, the people of Cuba will enjoy this same blessing.

This message of hope is directed especially to those who have made pleas for freedom only to be silenced by tyranny and oppression—individuals like Oscar Elias Biscet, Luis Enrique Ferrer, Ricardo Gonzalez, Jose Luis Garcia Paneque, and many others. It is equally intended for the families of such prisoners, who dearly miss their loved ones and continue to suffer oppression at the hands of the regime. The American people admire the courage of these families and the emerging civil society movement, reflected in the existence of groups like the *Damas de Blanco*, who stand up for the fundamental human rights bestowed by our Creator.

As long as there are people who fight for liberty, the United States will stand with them and speak out for those whose voices have been temporarily silenced. All Cubans have the right to be treated with dignity, so that they can rise as high as their talents and hard work will take them. This is the standard my administration and past administrations—regardless of political affiliation—have expected from the Cuban Government as the condition for improved relations.

My administration has continually challenged the Cuban Government to bring genuine political and economic changes and improve human rights and has made it clear that the United States stands prepared to respond to any request for assistance from a Cuba that transitions to democracy. The Castro regime's response to our offers has been continued repression of the Cuban people.

Throughout my Presidency, the plight of Cuba has been close to my heart. My sincere wish has been for the proud people of Cuba to take their rightful place in the community of democratic, freedom-loving nations.

Laura and I send our Cuban *hermanos y hermanas* a message of peace and love. May God bless you and continue to give you the faith and courage to fight for the day when the light of liberty will shine on the people of Cuba.

Proclamation 8338—Religious Freedom Day, 2009

January 13, 2009

By the President of the United States of America

A Proclamation

Religious freedom is the foundation of a healthy and hopeful society. On Religious Freedom Day, we recognize the importance of the 1786 passage of the Virginia Statute for Religious Freedom. We also celebrate the first liberties enshrined in our Constitution's Bill of Rights, which guarantee the free exercise of religion for all Americans and prohibit an establishment of religion.

Our Nation was founded by people seeking haven from religious persecution, and the religious liberty they found here remains one of this land's greatest blessings. As Americans, we believe that all people have inherent dignity and worth. Though we may profess different creeds and worship in different manners and places, we respect each other's humanity and expression of faith. People with diverse views can practice their faiths here while living together in peace and harmony, carrying on our Nation's noble tradition of religious freedom.

The United States also stands with religious dissidents and believers from around the globe who practice their faith peacefully. Freedom is not a grant of government or a right for Americans alone; it is the birthright of every man, woman, and child throughout the world. No human freedom is more fundamental than the right to worship in accordance with one's conscience.

Religious Freedom Day is an opportunity to celebrate our legacy of religious liberty, foster a culture of tolerance and peace, and renew commitments to ensure that every person on Earth can enjoy these basic human rights.

Now, Therefore, I, George W. Bush, President of the United States of America, by virtue of the authority vested in me by the Constitution and laws of the United States, do hereby proclaim January 16, 2009, as Religious Freedom Day. I call on all Americans to reflect on the great blessing of religious liberty, endeavor to preserve this

freedom for future generations, and commemorate this day with appropriate events and activities.

In Witness Whereof, I have hereunto set my hand this thirteenth day of January, in the year of our Lord two thousand nine, and of the Independence of the United States of America the two hundred and thirty-third.

George W. Bush

[Filed with the Office of the Federal Register, 11:15 a.m., January 14, 2009]

NOTE: This proclamation was published in the *Federal Register* on January 15.

Remarks on Presenting the Presidential Medal of Freedom at the Department of State

January 15, 2009

Thank you all. I got 5 days left; be seated. [Laughter]

Madam Secretary, thank you very much for your kind introduction, and thank you for these beautiful reminders of how fantastic it's been to work with you.

By the way, these are going to be at Southern Methodist University—[laughter]—proudly displayed at the Presidential Center I will build to remind our country of the timeless values of freedom and liberty. And I am honored to take them back to Texas. I'm honored to take my wife back to Texas too. [Laughter]

The award you gave Laura, Condi, is well deserved in my unobjective opinion. She has been awesome First Lady. And I'm proud to have been here in Washington. And you've been an awesome friend and a great Secretary of State.

You know, people—I tell people all the time, they ask me about Condi, and I say, "She's like my sister." We've been through a lot together. [Laughter] And one of the things about her is that she has never lost her great optimism. She's plenty tough when she needed to be tough; she's plenty charming when she needs to be charming. But during the darkest of days, she always had a sense of optimism and constantly reminded me of what is possible and what will happen if we don't lose confidence in fundamental