

bore up under the lack of respect and dignity and honor after all these years. And he said, "Give respect before you expect it, treat people the way you want to be treated, remember the mission, set the example, keep going." Those are words for all of us.

When Vernon Baker's commanding officer first wrote his award recommendation, he observed that Lieutenant Baker "desperately wanted the men of his company to hold their ground and was willing to sacrifice his own life in an effort to win our battle." That passage was never forwarded. When Ruben Rivers died, no award recommendation was made for the deeds we remember today. It was felt that the Silver Star he had already been—he had been given already was reward enough for a black man.

But when victory was complete in World War II, our Government made a pledge to correct cases in which Medals of Honor were deserved but not awarded. Today America honors that pledge. On behalf of the United States Congress, I award the Medal of Honor, our Nation's highest military award, to Vernon Baker; Edward Carter, Jr.; John Fox; Willy F. James, Jr.; Ruben Rivers; Charles Thomas; and George Watson.

A soldier who receives the Medal of Honor usually needs no further description. But we must remember something else here today. These heroes distinguish themselves in another almost unique way. In the tradition of African-Americans who have fought for our Nation as far back as Bunker Hill, they were prepared to sacrifice everything for freedom even though freedom's fullness was denied to them.

We remember Edward Carter, who unsuccessfully requested combat duty for 3 years, because until 1944 African-Americans were not allowed into action. When his request was finally granted, it was at the cost of his sergeant's stripes, because an African-American was not allowed to command white troops. Now those injustices are past.

Our military is among the most integrated institutions in America, a beacon to society, and among the most successful, for America is stronger than ever. In the service of General Colin Powell, General Benjamin Davis, General

Chappie James, and countless other outstanding African-Americans, we see the enormous strength that America's diversity has given us. The men we honor here today help to make their historic progress possible. They were denied their Nation's highest honor, but their deeds could not be denied, and they cleared the way to a better world.

Today, America is profoundly thankful for the patriotism and the nobility of these men and for the example they set, which helped us to find the way to become a more just, more free nation. They helped America to become more worthy of them and more true to its ideals.

To the families of the recipients who are gone, may you take comfort in the honor that has finally been done to your loved ones. And may God embrace their souls. And God bless you, Vernon Baker, and God bless America.

Commander, post the orders.

[At this point, Comdr. John Richardson, USN, read the citations, and Lt. Col. Michael G. Mudd, USA, assisted the President in presenting the medals.]

*The President.* I think it might be an appropriate way to close to say that when I gave Mr. Watson's medal to the Sergeant Major of the Army, he looked at it and smiled and he said, "This is indicative of the type of soldiers we have today, a group of people in our military, men and women, that really do reflect the vast and rich texture of our Nation."

As we adjourn, I would like to pay special respect to the other African-Americans who are here who are now or have been in uniform, to the other Medal of Honor winners who are here, and to all of you who have worked so that this day might become a reality. And to all of you again I say, your Nation thanks you, and God bless you.

Thank you.

NOTE: The President spoke at 11:12 a.m. in the East Room at the White House. In his remarks, he referred to Gen. Colin L. Powell, USA (ret.), former chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, and Sergeant Major of the Army Gene C. McKinney.