

Jan. 15 / Administration of William J. Clinton, 1998

NOTE: Identical letters were sent to Richard C. Shelby, chairman, Senate Select Committee on Intelligence, and Porter J. Goss, chairman, House Permanent Select Committee on Intelligence. This letter was released by the Office of the Press

Secretary on January 15. The memorandum of January 12 on certifications relating to the China-U.S. nuclear cooperation agreement is listed in Appendix D at the end of this volume.

Remarks on Presenting the Presidential Medal of Freedom January 15, 1998

The President. Thank you very much. I want to begin with a warm welcome to all of our guests here, our honorees and their family members, members of the administration, Members of Congress, other distinguished officials.

It is fitting that today this ceremony occurs on the birthday of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., who 21 years ago was granted this award by President Carter posthumously, to ensure that his legacy would live on. Until every child has the opportunity to live up to his or her God-given potential, free from want in a world at peace, Dr. King's work and our work is not yet done. He once said that "No social advance rolls on the wheels of inevitability." After 5 years in Washington, I know that is true. [Laughter] Humanity makes progress through decades of sweat and toil by dedicated individuals who give freely of themselves and who inspire others to do the same, the kind of heroic men and women we honor today.

All of our honorees has helped America to widen the circle of democracy by fighting for human rights, by righting social wrongs, by empowering others to achieve, by preserving our precious environment, by extending peace around the world. Every person here has done so by rising in remarkable ways to America's highest calling, the calling, as the First Lady said, of active citizenship.

On behalf of a grateful Nation, I would like to bestow the Presidential Medal of Freedom on these courageous citizens. Let me say, as I begin, that I am grateful to all of them who are here and those who are not.

First, Arnie Aronson, who unfortunately is ill and is represented here by his wife, Annette, his son, Bernie, his granddaughter, Felicia. Arnie Aronson, a glowing symbol of the coalition of conscience linking black and white communities, began his career in civil rights in 1941 when

he and A. Philip Randolph secured a landmark Executive order banning discrimination on the basis of race. He later cofounded the Leadership Conference on Civil Rights, helping hundreds of disparate groups keep their eyes on the prize and speak with one booming voice. As the legendary leader Clarence Mitchell, Jr., said of him, "There would not have been a civil rights movement without the Leadership Conference, and there would not have been a Leadership Conference without Arnie Aronson."

Commander Huey, please read the citation.

[At this point, Lt. Comdr. Wesley Huey, USN, Naval Aide to the President, read the citation, and the President congratulated Mr. Aronson's family and presented the medal.]

The President. I never contradict my wife in public, but I couldn't help thinking when she said we were honoring 15 ordinary American citizens today, I thought, yes, people like Brooke Astor and David Rockefeller. [Laughter] But I say that to make this point: In some ways, we honor them more, because they certainly had other options. [Laughter] And that is important to remember.

At the age of 15, about eight decades ago, Brooke Astor wrote a wise poem. In that poem, an elderly man implores a young girl, "Take thy spade and take thine ax. Make the flowers bloom." With her legendary largesse and unequalled grace, she has made more flowers bloom than anyone, not only at such recognizable landmarks as the New York Public Library and the Metropolitan Museum of Art but also in forgotten homeless shelters, youth centers, and nursing homes. She is not only New York's unofficial First Lady, she has become America's guardian angel.

Commander, read the citation.