

Meryl Streep, Stevie Wonder receive Presidential Medal of Freedom from Obama

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Barack Obama bestowed the Presidential Medal of Freedom, the highest civilian honor in the US, on 18 politicians, artists, scientists and others in a ceremony held in the East Room of the White House Monday afternoon.

Prominent among the medal recipients were actress Meryl Streep; singer-songwriter Stevie Wonder; civil rights workers James Chaney, Andrew Goodman and Michael Schwerner, slain in 1964 (whose awards were accepted by family members); dancer Alvin Ailey (also posthumously); novelist Isabel Allende and actress-activist Marlo Thomas.

In an astonishing development, five of the recipients refused their medals and read out a public statement—to the obvious consternation of the president and his staff—that said, in part:

“We cannot in good conscience accept honors from a president who speaks about our having made America ‘wiser, and more humane, and more beautiful,’ but who has presided over ‘kill lists,’ launched drone strikes that have murdered thousands of civilians, embarked on new wars behind the backs of the people, and persecuted defenders of constitutional rights such as Edward Snowden.”

The five then departed as one, placing their medals in a heap on the floor of the East Room and leaving the audience of dignitaries and journalists in considerable disarray...

Alas, of course, none of that took place. One wishes it had, but this is the United States in 2014 and these are individuals, some of whom pass for members of the American artistic intelligentsia, living at a time when rebelliousness within such circles is perhaps at its historical low point.

No one caused a fuss Monday. All of the recipients treated Obama, whose administration is the most

reactionary in American history, with nothing but the greatest deference and respect. At a time when every major public event in America is thoroughly scripted and guaranteed to represent no political threat to the establishment, one can be certain the recipients of the Medal of Freedom were checked, vetted and rechecked as to their reliability well ahead of time. Nothing is left to chance these days in official Washington.

Veteran politicians Rep. John Dingell and former congressman and federal judge Abner Mikva; Ethel Kennedy, the 86-year-old widow of Robert F. Kennedy; and television news anchor Tom Brokaw were also celebrated.

The group honored, which also included physicist and electrical engineer Mildred Dresselhaus, the daughter of Polish immigrants, and African American golfer Charles Sifford, was a combination of the genuinely talented, the genuinely deserving of public recognition, and longtime loyal servants of the ruling elite (Democratic former congressmen made up the single biggest bloc).

As always with Obama, the medal winners were selected with an eye to the ethnic and gender considerations that hold overwhelming sway over the Democratic Party. The process is so cynical and transparent that it approaches the farcical. One envisions administration officials first calculating the politically appropriate number, respectively, of women, African Americans, Latinos and Asians, gays, and popular celebrities, and then, working backward, filling in the blanks with the suitable names.

The group of artists and performers simply presents a pathetic spectacle of cluelessness and social complacency.

During her acting career, Streep has portrayed anticommunist witch-hunt victim Ethel Rosenberg, as

well as opponents of fascism, military dictatorship and corporate violence. She has appeared in other films that exposed antidemocratic conspiracies in the US and CIA torture. Of course, she also, shamefully, portrayed Margaret Thatcher in a sympathetic manner.

The president's mock-flirtatiousness directed at Streep, which she accepted with a graceful smile, was the most distasteful moment of the entire event: "I think this is like the third or fourth award Meryl's gotten since I've been in office, and I've said it publicly: I love Meryl Streep. I love her. Her husband knows I love her. Michelle knows I love her. There's nothing either of them can do about it. (Laughter.)"

Stevie Wonder [Stevland Hardaway Morris], born in Saginaw, Michigan, was a musical prodigy, signed by Motown Records at the age of 11 in 1961. After a string of hits beginning in 1963, Wonder hit his stride in the early 1970s with a series of musically and socially memorable albums, *Talking Book*, *Innervisions*, *Fulfillingness' First Finale* and *Songs in the Key of Life*. His 1974 single "You Haven't Done Nothin'" famously criticized President Richard Nixon and referred to "the nightmare/That's becoming real life."

What if Streep had denounced the criminal wars and the antidemocratic plots of the NSA? What if Wonder had spoken out about poverty in America and, in the first place, the city where he grew up and which the Obama administration helped bankrupt, Detroit? Such actions would have electrified great numbers of people in the US and around the world. No, nothing like that occurred...

No artist or performer in recent decades has been able to conjure up the spirit of singer and actress Eartha Kitt, who lambasted the Vietnam War during a 1968 appearance at the White House in the presence of Lady Bird Johnson, the president's wife. According to a reporter present, Kitt told Mrs. Johnson: "You send the best of this country off to be shot and maimed. They rebel in the street. They will take pot and they will get high. They don't want to go to school because they're going to be snatched off from their mothers to be shot in Vietnam."

Is there any well-known figure in Hollywood or the entertainment industry as a whole who would repudiate an honor from Obama or criticize his actions to his face? Possibly, but their number is disgracefully small.

(The bitter irony of Isabel Allende, a cousin of Salvador Allende, the Chilean president overthrown by a CIA-organized coup in 1973 during which he committed suicide, receiving an award handed to the US president by an individual in American military uniform was apparently lost on everyone.)

From NBC's Brokaw, now retired, one naturally expected nothing, and he delivered. His career has been distinguished by unswerving subservience to power. In 2004, at the time of Brokaw's exit from television broadcasting, we bluntly described him as "a self-satisfied nonentity, who has made no contribution to America's understanding of itself or the world," and suggested that he had "never to anyone's knowledge uttered a genuinely controversial sentence or formulated a thought that would make the powers-that-be lose any sleep."

The universal lubricant that renders such a ceremony as Monday's possible, the magical elixir that made it all come together without a hitch, is great wealth. Wealth overcomes all real or apparent barriers in these circles, warms every heart and, in Shakespeare's words, "solder'st close impossibilities, And makest them kiss!"

All in all, a repugnant ceremony.



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