

2016 Presidential Medal of Freedom ceremony

Obama awards those who “have helped make me who I am”

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The ceremony Tuesday afternoon during which Barack Obama bestowed the Presidential Medal of Freedom, the highest civilian honor in the US, on 21 individuals was a bizarre and unreal event. Those attending, including Obama, acted as though there were not a cloud in the political sky. The most telling element of the event was the self-involvement and self-satisfaction of the core group of prominent honorees.

During the hour-long event at the White House, Obama honored an eclectic mix of individuals, some of them genuinely gifted in their respective fields, some merely talented and fortunate, others simply wealthy.

Actors, singers, athletes and media personalities predominated. As usual, careful calculations had been made so that the appropriate ethnicities, genders and sexual orientations were covered.

This year’s recipients included billionaires Bill and Melinda Gates, singer-songwriter Bruce Springsteen, actors Robert Redford, Robert De Niro, Tom Hanks and Cicely Tyson, singer Diana Ross, comic Ellen DeGeneres, television producer Lorne Michaels, architect Frank Gehry, veteran sportscaster Vin Scully and basketball players Kareem Abdul-Jabbar and Michael Jordan.

Former chairman of the Federal Communications Commission Newton Minow, physicist Richard Garwin, computer scientists Margaret H. Hamilton and Grace Hopper, educator Eduardo Padrón, artist and designer Maya Lin and Native American activist Elouise Cobell were also recognized.

The White House event was held two weeks to the day after the November 8 election, which represented a repudiation of the Obama administration and the Democratic Party. The Democrats’ indifference to the

suffering of wide layers of the population, and their reliance on affluent identity politics and its practitioners, helped produce the coming to power of Donald Trump. This is the real Obama legacy, leaving the American people to the tender mercies of Trump and his gang of ultra-reactionaries.

The current president, however, who will leave the White House in two months and proceed to rake in millions of dollars—like the Clintons before him—was in a jovial mood Tuesday. “I always love doing this event, but this is a particularly impressive class,” he said. These were “his” people, this was “his” crowd. He made more jokes than usual, not all of them bad. He hugged celebrities and they hugged him back. It was a mutual admiration society.

If anything, the election result has cemented the well-to-do social element most widely represented on Tuesday even more closely to the Democrats. The applause for the various honorees, for Michelle and Barack Obama, for Vice President Joe Biden, was particularly enthusiastic, bordering on the frenzied.

The event on Tuesday was made possible by several decades of history, political and cultural. The protest generation of the late 1960s and 1970s has become wealthy and conservative, by and large. None of those being honored had a particularly radical past, although De Niro’s mother was a left-winger and the actor grew up in a “left” milieu, but a number of them rose to prominence on the crest of a generally oppositional or anti-establishment wave. It is that residual quality that gives them—and it is hoped by those organizing the event, by extension, Obama and figures in the Democratic Party—a certain credibility. This is what made the event so cynical and dishonest.

This kind of national-official prize-giving always has that character. The interesting or ground-breaking things that individuals have done are essentially stolen from them by politicians and become something to be used to intimidate and confuse the population. “See,” the people are told, “we, the government in power, love and admire these talented men and women, and they love and admire us in return—as you should.”

Two other themes or motifs were quite evident at the ceremony. Obama instructed his audience and viewers over and over again that the human beings on stage exemplified “the American spirit of discovery,” “the American promise,” “the American Dream” and so forth. Collectively, the president and the aide who subsequently introduced each honoree used “America” or “Americans” more than 40 times in their remarks. This is what the Democrats oppose to Trump’s openly right-wing nationalism—fraudulent, “populist,” “multi-ethnic” nationalism.

“And it’s useful when you think about this incredible collection of people,” Obama pontificated, “to realize that this is what makes us the greatest nation on Earth. ... Not because of our differences, but because, in our difference, we find something common to share. And what a glorious thing that is. What a great gift that is to America.”

No stranger to self-satisfaction, Obama managed to conflate himself and “America” in his remarks: “So, just on a personal note, part of the reason that these events are so special to me is because everybody on this stage has touched me in a very powerful, personal way—in ways that they probably couldn’t imagine. ... These are folks who have helped make me who I am [any honest soul would have run from the room at this point] ... and what also makes them special is, this is America.”

Second, it seemed as though every other honoree, even the scientists, had made his or her “entrepreneurial” mark. Wealth was not a prerequisite for receiving a Presidential Medal of Freedom in 2016, but it certainly did not hurt. Of course, the Gateses, the richest couple in America, led the parade. Michael Jordan, worth an estimated \$1.14 billion, came next. The others are not doing badly either: Tom Hanks (\$350 million-\$390 million), Lorne Michaels (\$350 million), Ellen DeGeneres (\$345 million), Bruce Springsteen (\$345 million), Diana Ross (\$250 million),

Robert De Niro (\$200 million), Robert Redford (\$170 million), Frank Gehry (\$50 million), Kareem Abdul-Jabbar (\$20 million) and Vin Scully (\$5 million).

Why is there such conformism in this crowd? Why did not one of these people reject the award or make a statement denouncing the Obama administration for its murders by drone and its policy of universal spying, its presiding over unprecedented levels of income inequality and its bailout of the banks, the answer comes naturally. The answer lies not only in the vast wealth accumulated by these layers and their identification with the state that defends it, but also in their increasing distance from the vast majority of the population, where anger and hostility to the existing social setup is seething.



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