

At Presidential Medal of Freedom Awards: Lowery continues quest for justice

Written by Hazel Trice Edney, NNPA Editor-in-Chief
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WASHINGTON (NNPA) – Within the same hour that the Rev. Joseph Lowery received America’s highest civilian honor, the civil rights icon – still at the White House – declared war on the “myth” that America is now a “post-racial” nation.

“The concept of a post racial era is a myth created by media and it ought to be dispersed,” said Lowery, responding to a question from the NNPA News Service in the White House press room. “We are not post racial.”

Among 16 people who received the Presidential Medal of Freedom from Barack Obama, America’s first African America president in the East Room of the White House on August 12, Lowery – awarded for his pioneering and lifetime achievements in fighting for civil rights – told a group of reporters that the struggle is not nearly over.

“I haven’t done nearly as much as I should have done. None of us have. ...In spite of all the progress we’ve made – and we’ve come a long way - we still have a mighty long way to go,” he said.

He said the arrest of Harvard professor Henry Louis Gates by Cambridge police officer James Crowley in his own home was “clear evidence that race is still a significant factor in life in America and they still don’t get it.”

He explained, “I remember when I used to lecture young people on how to deal with the police: ‘If the police confront you, keep your hands in the air and say a little prayer.’ And that is the nature of the historicity of the experience and every Black person brings that to a confrontation and White and Black police officers ought to understand that. Until they understand that the tension is always going to be there.”

Obama initially said at a press conference that the Cambridge police “acted stupidly” in making the arrest. Though the president later softened his language, Lowery said “he was right” the first time.

Lowery was among three Black men who received the coveted Medals, draped around their necks by Obama himself. Pioneering actor Sidney Poitier and heroic cleric and human rights leader Bishop Desmond Tutu were also honored.

The only one of the three who accepted reporters’ invitations to visit the press room after the ceremony, Lowery said Obama’s award to a civil rights leader in his first class of Presidential Medal awards said more about Obama than about himself.

“I think it’s a credit to President Obama that in his first class of awardees he included someone who can be viewed as a symbol from the struggle,” Lowery said. “To include me in the first class when you want to put your best foot forward says something about the nature and character of the man.”

He referred to himself as a “small town preacher who’s just an ordinary fellow.” His receiving the award ought “to encourage others like me to go ahead and serve the common good.”

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Lowery's medal citation reads: "Reverend Joseph E. Lowery has marched through life with faith and purpose, carrying with him the legacy of a movement that touched America's conscience and changed its history. At the forefront of the major civil rights events of our time -- from the Montgomery bus boycott to protests against apartheid -- he has served as a tireless beacon for nonviolence and social justice. As a pastor and civil rights advocate, he co-founded the Southern Christian Leadership Conference and championed the cause of peace and freedom around the world. The United States proudly honors this outstanding leader."

Sidney Poitier's medal citation reads: "Ambassador and actor, Sidney Poitier has left an indelible mark on American culture. Rising from the tomato farms of the Bahamas, his talent led him to Broadway, Hollywood, and global acclaim. In front of black and white audiences struggling to right the nation's moral compass, Sidney Poitier brought us the common tragedy of racism, the inspiring possibility of reconciliation, and the simple joys of everyday life. Ultimately, the man would mirror the character, and both would advance the nation's dialogue on race and respect."

Archbishop Emeritus Desmond Tutu's medal citation reads: "With unflagging devotion to justice, indomitable optimism, and an unmistakable sense of humor, Archbishop Emeritus Desmond Mpilo Tutu has stirred the world's conscience for decades. As a man of the cloth, he has drawn the respect and admiration of a diverse congregation. He helped lead South Africa through a turning point in modern history, and with an unshakable humility and firm commitment to our common humanity, he helped heal wounds and lay the foundation for a new nation. Desmond Tutu continues to give voice to the voiceless and bring hope to those who thirst for freedom."

The other 13 medal recipients are:

Nancy Goodman Brinker, who – "drawing strength from tragedy," has "transformed the nation's approach to breast cancer"; Dr. Pedro José "Joe" Greer Jr., who "devoted his career to improving medical services for the uninsured"; Stephen Hawking, who "dedicated his life to exploring the fundamental laws that govern the universe, and he has contributed to some of the greatest scientific discoveries of our time; Jack French Kemp, who, as a statesman and a sports icon, "advocated for his beliefs with an unwavering integrity and intellectual honesty"; US Sen. Edward M. Kennedy, who "has boldly fought for equal opportunity, fairness, and justice for all Americans" for more than four decades; Billie Jean Moffitt King, tennis champion, who "has advanced the struggle for greater gender equality around the world"; Joseph Medicine Crow, who, as a Native American, became "a warrior and living legend" who "is a symbol of strength and survival"; Harvey Bernard Milk, as an openly gay elected official, "dedicated his life to shattering boundaries and challenging assumptions"; Sandra Day O'Connor, retired Supreme Court justice and first woman to serve on the court, who "paved the way for millions of women to achieve their dreams"; Chita Rivera, who on stage and screen, "has captured America's imagination with her magnetic presence and radiant voice"; Mary Robinson, "a trail-blazing crusader for women's rights in Ireland and a forceful advocate for equality and human rights around the world"; Dr. Janet Davison Rowley, "the first scientist to identify a chromosomal translocation as the cause of leukemia and other cancers - considered among the most important medical breakthroughs of the past century"; Prof. Muhammad Yunus, with his belief in self-reliance, "has altered the face of finance and entrepreneurship."