

Remarks at a Luncheon for Recipients of the Medal of Freedom

November 10, 1988

Good afternoon. We award the Medal of Freedom, this nation's highest civilian honor, for the purpose of celebrating those whose lives have been dedicated to the cause of freedom -- nurturing it where it's young, defending it where it's grown frayed or troubled, and battling for it where it's denied. Over the past 8 years, we've honored 83 of you, and of you it can be said: They lived well because they fought for freedom.

Now, that's why it is such an honor to have you all here today, and why we yet mourn those of your fellows who've gone to a better place. The world is made smaller and more insignificant by their absence. All of you, with us or elsewhere, have justly earned the gratitude of all Americans of good will for being champions and defenders of the cause of freedom.

But you know, if you give that phrase some thought, it makes little sense. Defending freedom, you might ask? Why on Earth would that be necessary? As Americans, we know that freedom is as much a part of us as our blood. It's not a commodity. It can't be bought, can't be sold, and it can't be bartered away. No, my friends, despite the millions upon millions of words expended to describe its meaning, the truth is that the word "freedom" is deceptively simple. It's a word that describes the God-given condition of the human soul. For what we know is this: God created us free, just as he created us man and woman. Indeed, since Adam ate of the Tree of Knowledge, there's nothing that defines us human beings so much as the fact that we're free.

Sometimes you'll hear people ask, "What's freedom for?" Well, you might as well ask what breathing is for. Just watch a baby. Infants, all infants, will make their tastes and preferences known very clearly to their parents as soon as they're able to turn their heads. That's the act of a free soul. When they reach the age of 3, they'll begin to drive their parents mad by continually asking the question, "Why?" Why is the sky blue? Why is the grass green? That curiosity, that engagement in the world around them, is the voice of freedom. When they reach adulthood, young men and women will find themselves gazing into the eyes of another and knowing with the force of revelation that they've met their destiny in those eyes. And that's the gaze of freedom.

Some people say Americans take our freedom for granted. I think that may be the most glorious gift of all. The Constitution we have makes it possible for all Americans to assume that political freedom is their birthright from the moment they open their eyes. What you've all done, what you've all made clear to us, is that we cannot be content with our own freedom. No, we must bring it to others, must make it their birthright as well.

There are people who try to will freedom away. They try to legislate it away. Worse yet, they even go so far as to deny the validity of certain segments of our freedom -- as, for example, those people who believe human beings are free until they step into the marketplace, at which point they should be subject to full or partial state control. We call this idea socialism. Socialists believe humankind would be better off without economic freedom, and so they seek to replace it with rules and regulations. And if there's one tragic lesson the 20th century has taught us, it is that the social engineers cannot tailor the human soul to fit the fashions of the present day, no matter how they try. For the truth is, men cannot design humankind.

The world has come to acknowledge that socialism is a failed ideology. But there are worse. From the dawn of time, but especially from the dawn of a dark day in November 1917, there have also been those who have tried to throttle freedom. And that's what tyranny is. Some have argued that tyrants tyrannized their people for good reason, because the need for food outweighed the need for freedom. But that's a fundamental misunderstanding of tyranny. Tyrants tyrannize because that's what they do for a living. No one has described it half so well as Shakespeare when portraying Macbeth's dominion over Scotland: "Our country sinks beneath the yoke. It weeps. It bleeds. And each new day a gash is added to her wounds."

But the ungodly force called tyranny still cannot rid the human soul of its freedom, no matter how hard it may try. Tyrants can defy the benefits -- or deny the benefits, I should say -- of freedom to their peoples, can kill freedom by killing free people. But freedom itself they cannot have. For one thing, people like you won't allow it. Nor will that Higher Being allow it.

Our greatest freedom, the freedom to choose right from wrong, cannot be willed away by the tyrants. For God has given all humankind the gift of knowing right from wrong and the responsibility to choose between them. And how will we know which way to choose? Well, Saul Bellow's Mr. Sammler says it best in a prayer. "For that is the truth of it: that we all know, God, that we know, that we know, we know, we know." And this, my friends, is the essence of freedom -- that we follow the biblical admonition: "I have set before you life and death. Therefore choose life."

Like the Nation itself that has nurtured us and made us all whole, you have chosen life, and you've given others the courage to choose life as well. In a society like ours, where all men are created equal, the best a human being can hope to achieve is to make himself or herself an example to clear a path to righteousness that others may follow. This you've done. And because of you, oppressed peoples now breathe free. Because of you, the hopeless now have hope. And it's because of people like you and the Nation we live in that, I believe, with all my heart, as I told an audience at Georgetown University not long ago, we are living in a time that will come to be known as the age of freedom.

So, it's my privilege in these, the concluding days of my Presidency, to invite you to this fine White House as representative of the Nation that has bequeathed its bounties to all of us, to look about and say, along with Shakespeare, "What a piece of work is a man." And Shakespeare may have goofed, but I'm not going to, because I'm going to add "and a woman." [Laughter]

Thank you, and God bless you all.

Note: The President spoke at 1:17 p.m. in the East Room at the White House. In his remarks, he referred to American novelist Saul Bellow.

<http://www.reagan.utexas.edu/archives/speeches/1988/111088a.htm>