



THE WHITE HOUSE

PRESIDENT GEORGE W. BUSH

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For Immediate Release
Office of the Press Secretary
July 26, 2001

Remarks by the President in a Ceremony Honoring the Navajo Code Talkers

Rotunda, U.S. Capitol

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Washington, D.C.

1:41 P.M. EDT

THE PRESIDENT: Thank you very much. Today, America honors 21 Native Americans who, in a desperate hour, gave their country a service only they could give. In war, using their native language, they relayed secret messages that turned the course of battle. At home, they carried for decades the secret of their own heroism. Today, we give these exceptional Marines the recognition they earned so long ago.

I want to thank the Congress for inviting me here, Mr. Speaker. I want to thank Senators Campbell, Bingaman and Johnson and Congressman Udall for their leadership. I want to thank Sergeant Major McMichael, distinguished guests, ladies and gentlemen, welcome to Washington, D.C.

The gentlemen with us, John Brown, Chester Nez, Lloyd Oliver, Allen Dale June and Joe Palmer, represented by his son Kermit, are the last of the original Navajo Code Talkers. In presenting gold medals to each of them, the Congress recognizes their individual service, bravely offered and flawlessly performed.



With silver medals, we also honor the dozens more who served later, with the same courage and distinction. And with all these honors, America pays tribute to the tradition and community that produced such men, the great Navajo Nation. The paintings in this rotunda tell of America and its rise as a nation. Among them are images of the first Europeans to reach the coast, and the first explorer to come upon the Mississippi.

But before all these firsts on this continent, there were the first people. They are depicted in the background, as if extras in the story. Yet, their own presence here in America predates all human record. Before others arrived, the story was theirs alone.

Today we mark a moment of shared history and shared victory. We recall a story that all Americans can celebrate, and every American should know. It is a story of ancient people, called to serve in a modern war. It

is a story of one unbreakable oral code of the Second World War, messages traveling by field radio on Iwo Jima in the very language heard across the Colorado plateau centuries ago.

Above all, it's a story of young Navajos who brought honor to their nation and victory to their country. Some of the Code Talkers were very young, like Albert Smith, who joined the Marines at 15. In order to enlist, he said, I had to advance my age a little bit. At least one code talker was over-age, so he claimed to be younger in order to serve. On active duty, their value was so great, and their order so sensitive, that they were closely guarded. By war's end, some 400 Navajos had served as Code Talkers. Thirteen were killed in action, and their names, too, are on today's roll of honor.

Regardless of circumstances, regardless of history, they came forward to serve America. The Navajo code itself provides a part of the reason. Late in his life, Albert Smith explained, the code word for America was, "Our Mother." Our Mother stood for freedom, our religion, our ways of life, and that's why we went in. The Code Talkers joined 44,000 Native Americans who wore the uniform in World War II. More than 12,000 Native Americans fought in World War I. Thousands more served in Korea, Vietnam and serve to this very day.

Twenty-four Native Americans have earned the highest military distinction of all, the Medal of Honor, including Ernest Childers, who was my guest at the White House last week. In all these wars and conflicts, Native Americans have served with the modesty and strength and quiet valor their tradition has always inspired.

That tradition found full expression in the Code Talkers, in those absent, and in those with us today. Gentlemen, your service inspires the respect and admiration of all Americans, and our gratitude is expressed for all time, in the medals it is now my honor to present.

May God bless you all. (Applause.)

(The medals are presented.) (Applause.)

END 1:48 P.M. EDT