

Obama Gives Medal of Freedom to 16 Luminaries

BY SHERYL GAY STOLBERG

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WASHINGTON — President Obama took a break from the vitriol of the health care debate on Wednesday to bestow the Presidential Medal of Freedom on 16 luminaries in theater, sports, science, the humanities and politics, including Senator Edward M. Kennedy, Archbishop Desmond Tutu, the tennis great Billie Jean King, the actor Sidney Poitier and the physicist Stephen Hawking.

“This is a chance for me — and for the United States of America — to say thank you to some of the finest citizens of this country and of all countries,” Mr. Obama said at the ceremony in the East Room of the White House, praising the recipients for reminding Americans that excellence is still possible “in a moment when cynicism and doubt too often prevail.”

It was Mr. Obama’s first chance to award the medal, the highest civilian honor a president can bestow, and there were some emotional moments. When the president hugged Mr. Poitier, it was a poignant reminder of how the actor, who broke racial barriers, had paved



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President Obama presented the Medal of Freedom on Wednesday to, from left, the historian Joseph Medicine Crow, the tennis great Billie Jean King, the physicist Stephen Hawking, the actor Sidney Poitier and former Justice Sandra Day O’Connor. (Photographs by Doug Mills/The New York Times)

the way for Mr. Obama’s own journey to the White House. Ms. King, who was honored for her work advocating for the rights of women and gays, touched her medal to her lips when Mr. Obama draped it around her neck.

And Mr. Kennedy’s daughter, Kara, seemed to blink back tears as she accepted the award on behalf of her father, who is battling brain cancer. Mr. Obama introduced the honorees in alphabetical order, but saved Senator Kennedy for last, praising him as someone who has fought for soldiers, working families and students for nearly half a century, and whose life “has made a difference for us all.”

Two of the awards — to Jack Kemp, the one-time Republican vice-presidential candidate, and

Harvey Milk, the slain gay rights activist whose life story was chronicled in a film starring Sean Penn — were delivered posthumously. Mr. Kemp’s widow, Joanne Kemp, accepted his award; Mr. Milk’s award was accepted by his nephew, Stuart Milk.

The ceremony was not without controversy. The recipients included Mary Robinson, the former president of Ireland and human rights advocate, whose award has drawn the ire of Jewish groups and lawmakers who accuse her of exhibiting bias against Israel. The White House said Mr. Obama had no second thoughts about the award; during the ceremony, the president praised Mrs. Robinson for her work as “an advocate for the hungry and the hunted, the for-

gotten and the ignored.”

The honorees spanned cultures and disciplines. They included [Chita Rivera](#), who became famous when she played the role of Anita in “West Side Story”; Dr. Pedro Jose Greer Jr., who founded a medical clinic to treat Miami’s poor; Mohammad Yunus, a Bangladeshi economist who pioneered microfinance; the Rev. [Joseph E. Lowery](#), the civil rights advocate and co-founder of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference; and Joseph Medicine Crow, a World War II veteran and Native American historian and educator who wore a traditional feathered headdress at the ceremony.

Nancy Goodman Brinker, who was chief of protocol for Mr. Obama’s predecessor, President [George W. Bush](#), was honored for her work as founder of the Susan G. Komen Foundation, which raises money for breast cancer research. Dr. Janet Davison Rowley, who took up serious medical research at age 40, after raising four children, and went on to discover that genetic abnormalities can cause cancer, also received the medal.

[Sandra Day O’Connor](#), the first woman to serve on the [Supreme Court](#), was also among the honorees. ■