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THE WHITE HOUSE

EXCHANGE OF REMARKS  
BETWEEN THE PRESIDENT  
AND  
MARTHA GRAHAM  
UPON BEING PRESENTED WITH  
THE MEDAL OF FREEDOM

THE STATE DINING ROOM

10:13 P.M. EDT

THE PRESIDENT: Martha and distinguished guests:

It is wonderful to have you here tonight. And let me say at the outset, I apologize for being a little late. I had a friendly engagement with some of my friends from the press here. (Laughter)

But it is nice to have you here, and particularly in this Bicentennial year. I think each of us has celebrated the spirit and the vitality of the United States, and the person we are honoring tonight, Martha Graham, has been doing that for as long as most of us can remember.

When Martha Graham began her career in modern dance -- and I became a better authority on it since I married Betty (Laughter) -- she has not only raised people's eyebrows but she has raised sights. A true pioneer, she continuously broke new ground and challenged old assumptions.

Her innovations were so original that one startled traditionalist was reported to have said, "How long do you intend, Martha, to keep this up?" I think today America is very thankful that she is still keeping it up, and we congratulate her.

Martha Graham has not only expanded the horizons of modern dance, but she also moved inward to convey the deepest types of emotion. In doing so, she created what one critic labeled "an original way of communication." Long before the phrase "body language," Martha, entered our vocabulary, Martha Graham was using the human form to express human feelings.

Martha Graham's name, we all recognize, has become synonymous with modern dance. In addition to her work as a performer and a choreographer, she has provided inspiration and counseling to generations of young people, including Miss Betty Bloomer of Grand Rapids, Michigan. (Laughter)

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Her pupils learn that self-discipline is not an obstacle to creativity but a vehicle; that hard work does not distract from inspiration but rather allows it to reach its fullest dimension. And most of all, they learn to meet a situation with courage and complete honesty.

Over the years as a great dancer, Martha Graham has received many, many awards. Tonight she receives an award as a truly great American. Her visits abroad have given the word real meaning -- "ambassador". She has shown very clearly to all the world what is possible when personal genius is allowed to flourish under artistic and political freedom.

In America, the arts have blossomed, and we are justly proud of the great strides that we have made. Last year in the arena of dance alone there were more than four times as many professional dance companies as there were in 1965.

But the continued survival and the continued growth of the arts in America requires more than just the genius of the artist. It also requires the foresight, the generosity of both public and private sectors in order to have adequate support.

Tonight I take pleasure in announcing that I intend to seek full funding for the cultural challenge, grant program over the next three years. This will provide \$12 million in new Federal money for the arts next year and approximately \$50 million over the next three years. Because these grants will be made on the basis of one Federal dollar for every three raised from other sources, it can serve to generate \$200 million in new support for the arts.

Many, many people in this audience tonight were instrumental in providing the financial support that enabled Martha Graham's dance troupe to inspire America and truly to inspire the world.

Let me assure you that we in the Federal Government are going to do our part, Martha, to encourage the Martha Grahams of the future.

Tonight, however, there is only one Martha Graham, and all of America is very, very proud of her. And now, Martha, would you please join me here.

Martha, it gives me a great deal of pleasure to present to you one of our Nation's highest honors, the Medal of Freedom, and let me read, if I might, the citation before I actually put the sash in the appropriate place.

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The citation reads as follows: "Dancer, teacher, choreographer, Martha Graham has captivated the world with her magic and has left a legacy of imagination with all who have witnessed her talent. Her energy, creativity and daring have opened new doors of expression in dance. Her followers and friends adore her, and her country, the United States of America, is proud to proclaim her a brilliant star and a national treasure."

I, as well as Betty, decided that we won't try to pin this medal on her tonight, but we did think you might like to see it, and it will be her's, and we are honored that you are here and it is a great tribute to you and all Americans.

We are deeply grateful for your many, many contributions, Martha.

MS. GRAHAM: Mr. President and my very dear Betty, this is an overwhelming moment and there is very little to say even if you have an Irish tongue that my grandmother said was hung in the middle. (Laughter)

It is a little difficult for me to talk on such an occasion, but America has stood with me. I did not leave, I did not go to any country until I felt I had something to say, from here, and there is one woman here tonight who gave me my first chance. She signed a co-note. She was a co-maker at a bank, the National City Bank. Her name is Frances Steloff.

I had to have two co-makers, and then I paid it off. And it was \$1,000, and it was a tremendous amount of money. And then, about two years later, I had only one co-maker. Then I did not have to have any. And then, finally, when I didn't borrow any more, they came and asked me why I didn't borrow. (Laughter)

But when the President said that this lady had said "How long will you keep this up, Martha," -- it is dreadful; dreadful. She had seen me in Denison during the floating period. And I am deeply grateful to that period, but time does not stand still. She said this to me. I said, "I will keep it up as long as I have an audience."

I am dependent on those people to support me, and I can only say that they have, individually and my Government, and I am so happy about your news tonight and your endowment of the arts because there is a saying in Asia, "They had no poet so they died." In other words, the city, the country had no one to sing or to dance their imagination and their dreams and their faith, so they disappeared from the memory of man.

I like to feel that those of us who are dancers have contributed toward a singing voice that will go on for a long time, and this is the first wonderful big step, and I thank you.

THE PRESIDENT: May I offer a toast on behalf of Betty and myself to our superstar and a person that truly deserves the Medal of Freedom.