

29 Remarks on Presenting the Presidential Medal of Freedom
to DeWitt and Lila Acheson Wallace. *January 28, 1972*

Mr. and Mrs. Wallace and ladies and gentlemen:

This is a birthday party, as you all know, for the Reader's Digest, which is 50 years old. We have tried to pay a tribute to the Digest and to the founders of the Digest a little earlier in the State Dining Room, but since we have some special guests who were not able to join us there, but who we understand were able to be with us at another room that was available and also some special guests from the press, I think that all of us in this room would like to pay tribute to our honored guests.

I do not want to repeat here what I said in the Dining Room. And I have been trying to think of something that would perhaps express the feelings of everybody here who knows the Wallaces on this special day.

I think of the Digest, the years that I have read it and all the special articles, "How to Increase Your Word Power," "Life in These United States," but I think

of all the special articles that I remember, the features, the one that perhaps made the most indelible impression was the series, "The Most Unforgettable Character I Ever Met."

Tonight we could speak of Lila and DeWitt Wallace in terms of by far the biggest circulation of any publication in the world. We could speak of them as having created a publication that is now read by over 100 million people in the world. We could speak of them also as people who have created a publication which has perhaps, in the deepest sense, done more good in creating a feeling of idealism in this country and among people abroad, understanding of this country, than any publication we have ever had.

All of those things have been said and can be said by anyone. But I think for us, and everybody in this room is in that category tonight, who consider ourselves to be the Wallaces' special friends, I think we would say that in that 50 years of that wonderful series, "The Most Unforget-

table Character I Ever Met," the Digest made two great mistakes. The Digest never had Lila Wallace in it or DeWitt Wallace, and they both should have been in it.

Now Hobart Lewis² is the only one who could rectify that mistake, but Wally wouldn't let him do it if he tried.

So, tonight in the White House, in this room, in this company, before those who are friends of the Wallaces, friends of the Digest, contributors to it, readers of it, I, speaking for all of the United States and for readers of the Digest around the world, would like to rectify that error, one of the few the Digest has made. And if Mrs. Nixon would escort our two honored guests here, I will rectify it properly tonight.

The highest honor that can be given to a civilian in this country is the Medal of Freedom and it is one of those few discretionary powers that the United States President has in terms of honors, to determine who receives the Medal of Freedom. I have not often exercised that power and I think I, in this instance, have made a selection that millions of Americans and millions around the world will applaud.

Tonight, I first want to present a Medal of Freedom to DeWitt Wallace. The citation reads as follows:

"To DeWitt Wallace: The co-founder with Lila Acheson Wallace of The Reader's Digest and partner in its direction for half a century, he has made a towering contribution to that freedom of the mind from which spring all our other liberties. This magazine has become a monthly university in print, teaching 100 million readers worldwide the wonder of common

life and the scope of man's potential. In DeWitt Wallace, America has a son to be deeply proud of—one whose lifework shows American enterprise at its creative best, and the American ethic in its fullest flower."

I used the word partner deliberately in that citation, because of all the great business enterprises and publishing enterprises in this country, none has been a partnership from the beginning and throughout its existence more than the Reader's Digest. It began that way, it remains that way, and this wonderful partnership in their home, that some of us have had the privilege of visiting, and in this publication, is an example for all Americans and people around the world.

So the second citation reads:

"To Lila Acheson Wallace: Co-founder with DeWitt Wallace of The Reader's Digest half a century ago and partner with him in its direction ever since, Lila Wallace has helped make all America better read. Her vision and drive have given wings to the workhorse printed word, fashioning a Pegasus of a magazine that carries American insights to 100 million readers worldwide. Her gracious touch at Pleasantville has shown the way to infusing industrial settings with culture and the joy of work."

NOTE: The President spoke at 10:48 p.m. in the East Room at the White House. He spoke without referring to notes.

On the same day, the White House released a fact sheet on the Presidential Medal of Freedom.

Following the President's remarks, Mr. Wallace responded as follows:

I am absolutely flabbergasted. I am sure Lila is, too. We rather suspected some shenanigans might be going on, but I thought at most it might be a carving set or something of that sort.

² President and editor-in-chief of the Reader's Digest.

I can't for the life of me understand why there is such a shindig, such a glorious shindig, because a magazine is still in its infancy. I am sure it is going to have a long life, and normally we don't have these pow-wows for an infant that is still in its swaddling clothes.

Actually, I think the infant is so precocious that I am hopeful it will even skip entirely the trying period of adolescence.

By the way, I do not understand why the

President and Secretary Connally do not provide a round-trip 9-month ticket around the world for all these youngsters who are having this poor, sufferingness period of adolescence.

But we—Lila and I—will certainly remember this occasion as long as we live, and hopefully, far longer. I say that and I hope that Billy Graham and Norman Peale noted that.

I thank you, thank you, thank you.