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A Guide to Major Congressional and Presidential Awards

Updated December 10, 2024

Congressional Research Service

<https://crsreports.congress.gov>

R47020



A Guide to Major Congressional and Presidential Awards

This report is intended to help congressional offices obtain information about awards authorized by Congress and the President. It provides details about the establishment, criteria, selection process, and presentation of five presidential and congressional awards: the Congressional Award, Congressional Gold Medal, Medal of Honor, Presidential Medal of Freedom, and Presidential Citizens Medal. It also contains basic information on 20 additional awards and medals, though this is not a comprehensive list of U.S. government decorations.

SUMMARY

R47020

December 10, 2024

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Introduction

Congress and the executive branch have established a number of awards and medals for achievement in the arts, education, military service, science, and other fields.

Some awards, such as the Congressional Award, recognize the accomplishments of young Americans. Awards such as the Congressional Gold Medal and Presidential Medal of Freedom often honor a lifetime of exceptional achievement. Other awards, such as the Medal of Honor, recognize individual heroism.

This report provides information on the Congressional Award, Congressional Gold Medal, Medal of Honor, Presidential Medal of Freedom, and Presidential Citizens Medal. It also includes a list of 20 additional national awards and medals.

Congressional Award

In 1979, Congress established the Congressional Award Program “to promote initiative, achievement, and excellence among youths in the areas of public service, personal development, and physical and expedition fitness.”¹ Overseen by the Congressional Award Board,² participants who are 14 to 23 years old complete a self-designed program in four program areas: voluntary public service, personal development, physical fitness, and expedition/exploration. When participants fulfill the criteria, they can earn Congressional Award Certificates (Bronze, Silver, and Gold) and Congressional Award Medals (Bronze, Silver, and Gold).³

Traditionally, a gold medal ceremony at the U.S. Capitol recognizes recipients each year.⁴

The program may be contacted at:

Congressional Award Foundation
P.O. Box 77440
Washington, DC 20013
Phone: (888) 80-AWARD; (202) 226-0130
Email: information@congressionalaward.org
Website: <https://www.congressionalaward.org>

Congressional Gold Medal

Congressional Gold Medals are awarded by acts of Congress to express public gratitude for distinguished contributions, highlight the virtues of patriotism, and perpetuate the remembrance of great events. First issued by the Continental Congress to General George Washington in 1776,⁵ the medal is considered one of the highest honors bestowed on behalf of the nation.

¹ P.L. 96-114, 93 Stat. 851 (1979), codified at 2 U.S.C. §801-§808.

² For information on board membership and appointments, see CRS Report RL33313, *Congressional Membership and Appointment Authority to Advisory Commissions, Boards, and Groups*, by Jacob R. Straus.

³ “The Program,” Congressional Award Foundation, <https://www.congressionalaward.org/the-program>.

⁴ “Annual Gold Medal Summit,” Congressional Award Foundation, <https://www.congressionalaward.org/gold>.

⁵ Worthington Chauncey Ford (ed.), *Journals of the Continental Congress: 1774-1789*, vol. 4 (Washington: Government Printing Office, 1906), p. 234 (March 25, 1776).

Historically, Congress has awarded Congressional Gold Medals to recognize a lifetime of contribution or a singular achievement. Each Congressional Gold Medal is individually authorized and requires the U.S. Mint to design and strike the medal.⁶

Congressional Gold Medals can be awarded to either individuals or groups. When gold medals are awarded to individuals, the individual recipient, or his or her family, receives the gold medal. For instances in which a group is honored, a single gold medal is generally minted that is either awarded to the group or placed in a museum for future exhibition.

For additional information including a full list of Congressional Gold Medal recipients, see CRS Report R45101, *Congressional Gold Medals: Background, Legislative Process, and Issues for Congress*, by Jacob R. Straus.

Medal of Honor

The Medal of Honor is the nation's highest military honor. It is presented by the President "in the name of Congress," and is sometimes referred to as the Congressional Medal of Honor.⁷

Congress established the Medal of Honor during the Civil War to recognize soldiers who had distinguished themselves by their gallantry in action. It is the nation's highest military honor, awarded for acts of valor that are "above and beyond the call of duty."⁸

Recommendations for the Medal of Honor are generally made by the military commander or others present at the time of the act. These recommendations are reviewed by the Department of Defense, which makes the final determination on military awards.⁹

In addition to the prestige associated with the Medal of Honor, recipients receive additional courtesies and benefits, including a monthly pension of \$1,712.94 and access to certain military benefits.¹⁰

For additional information, including recommendation procedures, see CRS Report 95-519, *Medal of Honor: History and Issues*, by Barbara Salazar Torreon.

Presidential Medal of Freedom

The Presidential Medal of Freedom is typically described as the highest civilian award of the United States government. It has been called the "civilian equivalent" of the Medal of Honor.¹¹

President Harry S. Truman first created the Medal of Freedom to reward war-connected acts or services performed by civilians during World War II.¹² It was renamed and broadened by

⁶ In recent years, most Congressional Gold Medal statutes authorize the U.S. Mint to strike bronze duplicates for sale to the general public. For information on duplicate medals, see CRS In Focus IF10934, *Duplicate Congressional Gold Medals: Frequently Asked Questions*, by Jacob R. Straus.

⁷ Congressional Medal of Honor Society, *Statistics and FAQs*, at <https://www.cmohs.org/medal/faqs>.

⁸ 10 U.S.C. §9271.

⁹ Department of Defense Manual 1348.33, Volume 1, *Manual of Military Decorations and Awards: Medal of Honor*, May 7, 2021, at https://www.esd.whs.mil/Portals/54/Documents/DD/issuances/dodm/134833_Vol1.PDF.

¹⁰ See 38 C.F.R. §3.802 for information on benefits, and see <https://www.va.gov/disability/compensation-rates/special-benefit-allowance-rates/> for the Medal of Honor pension rate as of December 1, 2024.

¹¹ "Presidential Medal of Freedom" in *The Presidency A to Z*, 5th ed., eds. Gerhard Peters and John T. Woolley (Thousand Oaks, CA: CQ Press, 2013), pp. 451-452.

¹² Executive Order 9586, "The Medal of Freedom," 10 *Federal Register* 8523, July 6, 1945.

President John F. Kennedy in 1963 to recognize “any person who has made an especially meritorious contribution to (1) the security or national interests of the United States, or (2) world peace, or (3) cultural or other significant public or private endeavors.”¹³ There are two degrees of the Medal, the higher being the Presidential Medal of Freedom with distinction.

The President has wide discretion to bestow the medal on “any person recommended to the President for award of the Medal or any person selected by the President upon his own initiative.”¹⁴ As such, recipients tend to reflect the personal and political interests of the President. The accomplishments of past recipients have been in wide-ranging fields, including public service, journalism, business, sports, and entertainment.¹⁵

The award is generally presented by the President at a White House ceremony. It may be awarded posthumously and to non-U.S. citizens.

There is no formal nomination and selection procedure,¹⁶ but letters making recommendations may be sent to the President.

For additional information including a full list of Presidential Medal of Freedom recipients, see CRS Report R47639, *Presidential Medal of Freedom*, by Ben Leubsdorf.

Presidential Citizens Medal

In 1969, President Richard M. Nixon created the Presidential Citizens Medal “for the purpose of recognizing citizens of the United States of America who have performed exemplary deeds of service for their country or their fellow citizens.”¹⁷ It is generally described as the second-highest civilian award of the U.S. government.¹⁸

The Presidential Citizens Medal “may be bestowed by the President upon any citizen of the United States at the sole discretion of the President,” and it can be awarded posthumously.¹⁹ Recent recipients at White House ceremonies have included activists, athletes, disaster

¹³ Executive Order 11085, “The Presidential Medal of Freedom,” 28 *Federal Register* 1759, February 22, 1963.

¹⁴ Executive Order 11515, “Terminating Certain Bodies Established by the President,” 35 *Federal Register* 4543, March 13, 1970.

¹⁵ See Bruce Wetterau, *The Presidential Medal of Freedom: Winners and Their Achievements* (Washington: Congressional Quarterly Inc., 1996), and Lawrence M. Watson, *The Presidential Medal of Freedom* (Claymont, DE: Orders and Medals Society of America, 2014).

¹⁶ Juliet Eilperin, “One of the Last Washington Mysteries: How to Get the Medal of Freedom,” *The Washington Post*, November 23, 2015, at https://www.washingtonpost.com/politics/one-of-the-last-washington-mysteries-how-to-get-the-medal-of-freedom/2015/11/23/d3351fa2-91f3-11e5-b5e4-279b4501e8a6_story.html.

¹⁷ Executive Order 11494, “Establishing the Presidential Citizens Medal,” 34 *Federal Register* 18291, November 13, 1969.

¹⁸ See, for example, Kelly Hooper, “Biden to Award Presidential Citizens Medal to Several Jan. 6 Heroes,” *Politico*, January 5, 2023, at <https://www.politico.com/news/2023/01/05/biden-awards-presidential-citizens-medal-to-several-jan-6-heroes-00076550>; White House, “Remarks by President Trump at the Presentation of the Presidential Medal of Freedom to Dan Gable,” press release, December 7, 2020, <https://trumpwhitehouse.archives.gov/briefings-statements/remarks-president-trump-presentation-presidential-medal-freedom-dan-gable>; Charles J. Lewis and Stewart M. Powell, “Obama Presents Medals For Slain Sandy Hook Educators,” *Connecticut Post*, February 15, 2013, at <https://www.ctpost.com/local/article/Obama-presents-medals-for-slain-Sandy-Hook-4283610.php>; and White House, Office of the Press Secretary, “The President Participates in a Ceremony for 2008 Recipients of the Presidential Citizens Medal,” press release, December 10, 2008, at <https://georgewbush-whitehouse.archives.gov/news/releases/2008/12/20081210-3.html>.

¹⁹ E.O. 11494.

responders, election workers, public officials, leaders of cultural institutions, police officers, teachers, and volunteers.²⁰

As with the Presidential Medal of Freedom, recommendations for the Presidential Citizens Medal may be sent to the President.

Additional Awards and Medals

Table 1 contains information about selected medals and awards presented by or in the name of the President, as well as selected medals and awards established by Congress. It does not include military medals or awards. This is not a comprehensive list of all civilian honors awarded or authorized by the U.S. government. Resources listed in the “Additional Information” column generally contain details about the nomination and selection process for that award.

Table 1. Selected National Medals and Awards

Award or Medal	Eligibility/Purpose	Additional Information
Alan T. Waterman Award	“Younger scientists whose capabilities and accomplishments show exceptional promise of significant future achievement” (42 U.S.C. §1881a)	https://new.nsf.gov/od/honorary-awards/waterman
Congressional Space Medal of Honor	“Any astronaut who in the performance of the astronaut’s duties has distinguished himself or herself by exceptionally meritorious efforts and contributions to the welfare of the Nation and of humankind” (51 U.S.C. §30901)	https://www.nasa.gov/history/congressional-space-medal-of-honor
Enrico Fermi Award	“Scientists, engineers, and science policymakers who have given unstintingly over their careers to advance energy science and technology”	https://science.osti.gov/fermi
Malcolm Baldrige National Quality Award	“Companies and other organizations which ... have substantially benefited the economic or social well-being of the United States through improvements in the quality of their goods or services resulting from the effective practice of quality management” (15 U.S.C. §3711a)	https://www.nist.gov/baldrige
National Humanities Medal	“Individuals and organizations whose work has deepened our nation’s understanding of and engagement with history, literature, languages, philosophy, and other humanities subjects”	https://www.neh.gov/about/awards/national-humanities-medals-nominations
National Medal for Museum and Library Service	“Outstanding libraries and museums that have made significant contributions in service to their communities” (20 U.S.C. §9107)	https://www.ims.gov/grants/available/national-medal-museum-and-library-service

²⁰ U.S. President (Biden), “Remarks on Presenting the Presidential Citizens Medal,” *Daily Compilation of Presidential Documents* (January 6, 2023); U.S. President (Trump), “Remarks on Presenting the Presidential Citizens Medal to C. Richard Rescorla,” *Daily Compilation of Presidential Documents* (November 7, 2019); U.S. President (Obama), “Remarks on Presenting the Presidential Citizens Medals,” *Daily Compilation of Presidential Documents* (February 15, 2013); U.S. President (Obama), “Remarks on Presenting the Presidential Citizens Medals,” *Daily Compilation of Presidential Documents* (October 20, 2011); U.S. President (G.W. Bush), “Remarks on Presenting the Presidential Citizens Medals,” *Weekly Compilation of Presidential Documents*, vol. 44 (November 17, 2008), pp. 1428-1429; U.S. President (Clinton), “Remarks on Presenting the Presidential Citizens Medal,” *Weekly Compilation of Presidential Documents*, vol. 37 (January 8, 2001), pp. 41-49.

Award or Medal	Eligibility/Purpose	Additional Information
National Medal of Arts	“Individuals or groups ... deserving of special recognition by reason of their outstanding contributions to the excellence, growth, support, and availability of the arts in the United States” (20 U.S.C. §955b)	https://www.arts.gov/honors/medals
National Medal of Science	“Individuals ... deserving of special recognition by reason of their outstanding contributions to knowledge in the physical, biological, mathematical, engineering, behavioral or social sciences” (42 U.S.C. §1881)	https://new.nsf.gov/od/honorary-awards/national-medal-of-science
National Security Medal	“Any person ... for distinguished achievement or outstanding contribution made on or after July 26, 1947, in the field of national security through either exceptionally meritorious service performed in a position of high responsibility or through an act of heroism requiring personal courage of a high degree and complete disregard of personal safety” (E.O. 13709, October 2, 2015)	Executive Order 10431 (January 19, 1953), as amended by Executive Order 13709 (October 2, 2015).
National Medal of Technology and Innovation	“Individuals or companies ... deserving of special recognition by reason of their outstanding contributions to the promotion of technology or technological manpower for the improvement of the economic, environmental, or social well-being of the United States” (15 U.S.C. §3711)	https://www.uspto.gov/learning-and-resources/ip-programs-and-awards/national-medal-technology-and-innovation-nmti
President’s Environmental Youth Award	“Outstanding environmental stewardship projects developed by K-12 youth”	https://www.epa.gov/education/presidents-environmental-youth-award
President’s Volunteer Service Award	“Individuals whose service positively impacts communities in every corner of the nation and inspires those around them to take action, too”	https://presidentalserviceawards.gov
Presidential Awards for Excellence in Mathematics and Science Teaching	“The highest honors bestowed by the United States government specifically for K-12 science, technology, engineering, and mathematics teaching”	https://paemst.nsf.gov
Presidential Early Career Award for Scientists and Engineers	“Outstanding scientists and engineers beginning their independent careers”	https://new.nsf.gov/od/honorary-awards/pecase
Presidential Rank Award	Career appointees who demonstrate “sustained accomplishment” or “sustained extraordinary accomplishment” (5 U.S.C. §4507)	https://www.opm.gov/policy-data-oversight/senior-executive-service/presidential-rank-awards
Presidential Scholars Program	“Persons who have recently been graduated, or are about to be graduated, from secondary schools, public or private ... chosen on the basis of their outstanding scholarship” (E.O. 11155, May 23, 1964)	https://www.ed.gov/grants-and-programs/recognition-programs/us-presidential-scholars-program

Award or Medal	Eligibility/Purpose	Additional Information
President's "E" and "E Star" Awards	"Persons, firms, and organizations engaged in the marketing of products who make significant contributions to the expansion of the export trade of the United States" (E.O. 10978, December 5, 1961)	https://www.commerce.gov/tags/e-awards
President's Award for Distinguished Federal Civilian Service	"Civilian officers or employees of the Federal Government for the best achievements having current impact in improving Government operations or serving the public interest" (E.O. 10717, June 27, 1957)	https://www.opm.gov/policy-data-oversight/performance-management/performance-management-cycle/rewarding/the-presidents-award-for-distinguished-federal-civilian-service
President's Education Awards	"Honors graduating elementary, middle and high school students for their achievement and hard work"	https://www.ed.gov/grants-and-programs/recognition-programs/presidents-education-awards-program
Public Safety Officer Medal of Valor	"A public safety officer who is cited by the Attorney General, upon the recommendation of the Medal of Valor Review Board, for extraordinary valor above and beyond the call of duty" (42 U.S.C. §15201)	https://bja.ojp.gov/program/medalofvalor

Sources: *United States Code, Codification of Presidential Proclamations and Executive Orders, Daily Compilation of Presidential Documents, agency websites.*

Notes: "Eligibility/Purpose" text comes from the website listed under "Additional Information" if not cited to a section of the *U.S. Code* or an executive order. Note that this table excludes military decorations and is not a comprehensive list of U.S. government civilian awards.

Related CRS Resources

CRS Report R43539, *Commemorations in Congress: Options for Honoring Individuals, Groups, and Events*, coordinated by Jacob R. Straus.

CRS Report R45101, *Congressional Gold Medals: Background, Legislative Process, and Issues for Congress*, by Jacob R. Straus.

CRS In Focus IF12085, *Congressional Gold Medals: Categorization of Proposed and Enacted Medals, 1973-2020*, by Jacob R. Straus and Jared C. Nagel.

CRS In Focus IF10934, *Duplicate Congressional Gold Medals: Frequently Asked Questions*, by Jacob R. Straus.

CRS Report 95-519, *Medal of Honor: History and Issues*, by Barbara Salazar Torreon.

CRS Report RS21282, *Military Service Records, Awards, and Unit Histories: A Guide to Locating Sources*, by Barbara Salazar Torreon and Travis A. Ferrell.

CRS Report R47639, *Presidential Medal of Freedom*, by Ben Leubsdorf.

CRS Report R42704, *The Purple Heart: Background and Issues for Congress*, by Barbara Salazar Torreon and Carly A. Miller.

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