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A Guide to Major Congressional and Presidential Awards

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A Guide to Major Congressional and Presidential Awards

This report is intended to help congressional offices obtain information about civilian awards authorized by Congress and the President. It provides details about the establishment, criteria, selection process, and presentation of the Congressional Award, Congressional Gold Medal, Presidential Medal of Freedom, and Presidential Citizens Medal. It also contains basic information on 30 additional awards and medals, though this is not necessarily a comprehensive list of nonmilitary U.S. government decorations. This report does not include information about military service awards.

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Introduction

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

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

This report provides information on the Congressional Award, Congressional Gold Medal, Presidential Medal of Freedom, and Presidential Citizens Medal. It also includes a list of 30 additional national awards and medals. This report does not include information about military service decorations, though the “Related CRS Resources” section includes links to CRS products on military medals and awards.

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 (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 awarded to the group and then often placed in a museum, which is specified in the authorization, 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.

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”⁷ of the Medal of Honor, the nation’s highest military honor.⁸

President Harry S. Truman first created the Medal of Freedom to reward war-connected acts or services performed by civilians during World War II.⁹ It was renamed and broadened by 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.”¹⁰ 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.”¹¹ 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.¹²

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

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

⁸ For more information, see CRS Report 95-519, *Medal of Honor: History and Issues*, by Barbara Salazar Torreon.

⁹ Executive Order 9586, “The Medal of Freedom,” 10 *Federal Register* 8523, July 6, 1945.

¹⁰ Executive Order 11085, “The Presidential Medal of Freedom,” 28 *Federal Register* 1759, February 22, 1963.

¹¹ Executive Order 11515, “Terminating Certain Bodies Established by the President,” 35 *Federal Register* 4543, March 13, 1970.

¹² See Bruce Wetterau, *The Presidential Medal of Freedom: Winners and Their Achievements* (Congressional Quarterly Inc., 1996), and Lawrence M. Watson, *The Presidential Medal of Freedom* (Orders and Medals Society of America, 2014).

There is no formal nomination and selection procedure,¹³ 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.”¹⁴ It is generally described as the second-highest civilian award of the U.S. government.¹⁵

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.¹⁶ The award is generally presented by the President at a White House ceremony.

Recent recipients have included activists, athletes, disaster responders, election workers, public officials, leaders of cultural institutions, police officers, teachers, and volunteers.¹⁷

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

¹³ 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.

¹⁴ Executive Order 11494, “Establishing the Presidential Citizens Medal,” 34 *Federal Register* 18291, November 13, 1969.

¹⁵ 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>.

¹⁶ E.O. 11494.

¹⁷ 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.

authorized by the U.S. government. Some medals or awards on this list may be inactive at this time.

Table I. Selected National Medals and Awards

| Award or Medal (Agency) | Eligibility/Purpose | Additional Information |
|--|---|---|
| Administrator’s Award for Distinguished Public Safety Service (Federal Emergency Management Agency, Department of Justice) | “Presented by the Administrator of FEMA or by the Attorney General to public safety officers for distinguished service in the field of public safety” (15 U.S.C. §2214b) | Title 15, Section 2214, of the <i>United States Code</i> , and Title 44, Part 150, of the <i>Code of Federal Regulations</i> |
| Alan T. Waterman Award (National Science Foundation) | “Younger scientists whose capabilities and accomplishments show exceptional promise of significant future achievement” (42 U.S.C. §1881a) | Title 42, Section 1881a, of the <i>United States Code</i> , and https://www.nsf.gov/honorary-awards/waterman |
| Commercial Space Achievement Award (Department of Commerce) | “Individuals, corporations, corporate divisions, or corporate subsidiaries substantially engaged in commercial space activities that” best meet criteria including “activities and achievements ... [that] have substantially contributed to the United States gross national product and the stature of United States industry in international markets, with due consideration for both the economic magnitude and the technical quality of the activities and achievements” and “substantially advanced space technology and space applications directly related to commercial space activities” (51 U.S.C. §50506b) | Title 51, Section 50506, of the <i>United States Code</i> , and https://space.commerce.gov/law/award |
| Congressional Space Medal of Honor (National Aeronautics and Space Administration) | “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) | Title 51, Section 30901, of the <i>United States Code</i> ; Title 14, Subpart 1221.2, of the <i>Code of Federal Regulations</i> ; and https://www.nasa.gov/history/congressional-space-medal-of-honor |
| Edward R. Madigan United States Agricultural Export Excellence Award (Department of Agriculture) | “Companies and other entities that ... substantially encourage entrepreneurial efforts in the food and agriculture sector for advancing United States agricultural exports” (7 U.S.C. §5678c) | Title 7, Section 5678, of the <i>United States Code</i> |
| Enrico Fermi Award (Department of Energy) | “Scientists, engineers, and science policymakers who have given unstintingly over their careers to advance energy science and technology” | https://science.osti.gov/fermi |

| Award or Medal (Agency) | Eligibility/Purpose | Additional Information |
|---|---|---|
| John Heinz Competitive Excellence Award (Congress) | “An individual and an organization, institution, or business that has demonstrated excellence in promoting United States industrial competitiveness in the international marketplace through technological innovation, productivity improvement, or improved competitive strategies” (2 U.S.C. §831 d) | Title 2, Section 831, of the <i>United States Code</i> |
| Lifesaving Medal (Department of Homeland Security) | “Any individual, including personnel of the Coast Guard, who rescues or endeavors to rescue any other individual from drowning, shipwreck, or other peril of the water” (14 U.S.C. §2744a) | Title 14, Section 2744, of the <i>United States Code</i> , and Title 33, Subpart 13.01, of the <i>Code of Federal Regulations</i> |
| Malcolm Baldrige National Quality Award (National Institute of Standards and Technology) | “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) | Title 15, Section 3711a, of the <i>United States Code</i> , and https://www.nist.gov/baldrige |
| Medal of Honor (Department of Transportation) | “An individual who by extreme daring endangers that individual’s life in trying to prevent, or save the life of another in, a grave accident in the United States involving a rail carrier providing transportation in interstate commerce or involving a motor vehicle on the public streets, roads, or highways” (49 U.S.C. §80504) | Title 49, Section 80504, of the <i>United States Code</i> , and Title 49, Part 79, of the <i>Code of Federal Regulations</i> |
| National Award for the Advancement of Motor Vehicle Research and Development (Department of Transportation) | “Domestic motor vehicle manufacturers, suppliers, or Federal laboratory personnel who ... have substantially improved domestic motor vehicle research and development in safety, energy savings, or environmental impact” (15 U.S.C. §3711c) | Title 15, Section 3711c, of the <i>United States Code</i> |
| National Humanities Medal (National Endowment for the Humanities) | “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 (Institute of Museum and Library Services) | “Outstanding libraries and museums that have made significant contributions in service to their communities” (20 U.S.C. §9107) | Title 20, Section 9107, of the <i>United States Code</i> , and https://www.ims.gov/grants/available/national-medal-museum-and-library-service |
| National Medal of Arts (National Endowment for the 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) | Title 20, Section 955b, of the <i>United States Code</i> , and https://www.arts.gov/honors/medals |

| Award or Medal (Agency) | Eligibility/Purpose | Additional Information |
|--|---|---|
| National Medal of Science (National Science Foundation) | “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) | Title 42, Section 1881, of the <i>United States Code</i> and https://www.nsf.gov/honorary-awards/national-medal-science |
| National Security Medal (National Security Council) | “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 (Department of Commerce) | “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) | Title 15, Section 3711, of the <i>United States Code</i> , and https://www.uspto.gov/learning-and-resources/ip-programs-and-awards/national-medal-technology-and-innovation-nmti |
| President’s Environmental Youth Award (Environmental Protection Agency) | “Outstanding environmental stewardship projects developed by K-12 youth” | https://www.epa.gov/education/presidents-environmental-youth-award |
| President’s Volunteer Service Award (Corporation for National and Community Service) | “Recognition of outstanding volunteer service ... thereby encouraging more such activity” (E.O. 13371, January 27, 2005) | Executive Order 13371 (January 27, 2005) and https://presidentalserviceawards.gov |
| Presidential Awards for Excellence in Mathematics and Science Teaching (National Science Foundation) | “Kindergarten through grade 12 school teachers of mathematics and science who have demonstrated outstanding teaching ability in the field of teaching mathematics or science” (42 U.S.C. §1881b) | Title 42, Section 1881b, of the <i>United States Code</i> , and https://paemst.nsf.gov |
| Presidential Early Career Award for Scientists and Engineers (White House Office of Science and Technology Policy) | “Outstanding scientists and engineers beginning their independent careers” | https://www.nsf.gov/honorary-awards/pecase |
| Presidential Rank Award (Office of Personnel Management) | Career appointees who demonstrate “sustained accomplishment” or “sustained extraordinary accomplishment” (5 U.S.C. §4507) | Title 5, Section 4507, of the <i>United States Code</i> ; Title 5, Section 451.301, of the <i>Code of Federal Regulations</i> ; and https://www.opm.gov/policy-data-oversight/senior-executive-service/presidential-rank-awards |

| Award or Medal (Agency) | Eligibility/Purpose | Additional Information |
|---|--|--|
| Presidential Scholars Program (Department of Education) | “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) | Executive Order 11155 (May 23, 1964) and https://www.ed.gov/grants-and-programs/recognition-programs/us-presidential-scholars-program |
| President’s “E” and “E Star” Awards (Department of Commerce) | “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) | Executive Order 10978 (December 5, 1961) and https://www.commerce.gov/tags/e-awards |
| President’s Award for Distinguished Federal Civilian Service (Office of Personnel Management) | “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) | Executive Order 10717 (June 27, 1957), as amended by Executive Order 10979 (December 12, 1961); Executive Order 11085 (February 22, 1963); Executive Order 12014 (October 19, 1977); and Executive Order 12107 (December 28, 1978) |
| President’s Education Awards (Department of Education) | “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 (Department of Justice) | “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) | Title 42, Section 15201, of the <i>United States Code</i> , and https://bja.ojp.gov/program/medalofvalor |
| Spark M. Matsunaga Medal of Peace (United States Institute of Peace) | “Such person or persons who ... have contributed in extraordinary ways to peace among the nations and peoples of the world, giving special attention to contributions that advance society’s knowledge and skill in peacemaking and conflict management” (22 U.S.C. §4604c) | Title 22, Section 4604, of the <i>United States Code</i> |
| Young American Medal for Bravery (Department of Justice) | “Any child residing in the United States, who is eighteen years old or under, who has exhibited exceptional courage, extraordinary decision, presence of mind, and unusual swiftness of action, regardless of his or her own personal safety, in an effort to save or successfully saving the life or lives of any person or persons whose life or lives were in actual imminent danger” (42 U.S.C. §1921) | Title 42, Sections 1921 and 1923-1924, of the <i>United States Code</i> , and Title 28, Section 50.22, of the <i>Code of Federal Regulations</i> |
| Young American Medal for Service (Department of Justice) | “American boy or girl citizens, eighteen years old or under, who ... shall have achieved outstanding or unusual recognition for character and service during any given year” (42 U.S.C. §1922) | Title 42, Sections 1922-1924, of the <i>United States Code</i> , and Title 28, Section 50.22, of the <i>Code of Federal Regulations</i> |

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

Notes: The agency or office listed in the “Award or Medal (Agency)” column is the agency that either administers the award or, in some cases, is involved in choosing or recommending recipients. “Eligibility/Purpose” text comes from the website listed under “Additional Information” if not cited to another

source, such as 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. Some medals or awards on this list may be inactive at this time.

Related CRS Resources

CRS In Focus IF13165, *Commemoration of the 250th Anniversary of the Declaration of Independence: Coins and Medals*, by Jacob R. Straus.

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

CRS Report R44623, *Commemorative Coins: Background, Legislative Process, and Issues for Congress*, 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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