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A Guide to Major Congressional and Presidential Awards

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SUMMARY

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Barbara Salazar Torreon
Senior Research Librarian

A Guide to Major Congressional and Presidential Awards

This report is designed to help congressional offices obtain information about major awards given by Congress and the President. It lists details about the establishment, criteria, selection process, and presentation of each of the major presidential and congressional awards: Congressional Award, Congressional Gold Medal, Medal of Honor, Presidential Citizens Medal, and Presidential Medal of Freedom. Brief entries are provided for additional awards. Contact information is provided as available for the organization responsible for making the award and brief information about an award. References to CRS products on awards are also given.

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Congressional Awards

Congressional Award

In 1979, the Congressional Award Act was enacted.[1] The act created the Congressional Award Program and the Congressional Award Board.[2] The Congressional Award Program is designed to

> promote initiative, achievement, and excellence among youths in the areas of public service, personal development and physical and expedition fitness. Under the program medals shall be awarded to young people within the United States, aged fourteen through twenty-three (subject to such exceptions as the Board may prescribe), who have satisfied the standards of achievement established by the Board.[3]

under the authority of the Secretary of the Treasury,[4] that "consist of gold-plate over bronze, rhodium over bronze, or bronze."[5] Members of Congress often present the award, when appropriate,[6] and the board can provide scholarships to gold, silver, and bronze medal recipients.[7] Traditionally, a gold medal ceremony at the U.S. Capitol recognizes recipients each year.[8] The Congressional Award Program was established in 1979 to promote initiative, achievement, and excellence among youths age 14 to 23. Award recipients complete a self-designed program in four program areas: voluntary service, personal development, physical fitness, and When participants fulfill the criteria, the Congressional Award Board issues medals, struck expedition/exploration.[9] There is no limit on the number of Congressional Awards given in a year. It is described as "non-partisan, voluntary, and non-competitive."[10] The program is for youth between the ages of 14 and 24, "regardless of ability, circumstances, or socioeconomic status."[11] Program participants can earn a Congressional Award Certificate (Bronze, Silver, and Gold) or Medal (Bronze, Silver, and Gold).[12] Senators and Representatives present the awards at local, city, or state ceremonies.

The foundation may be contacted at:

Washington, DC 20013(888) 80-AWARD; (202) 226-0130

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[1] P.L. 94-114, 93 Stat. 851 (1979); 2 U.S.C. §§801-808.

[2] The Congressional Award Act was reauthorized by P.L. 115-268 (132 Stat. 3762 (2018)) through October 1, 2023. The Congressional Award Board consists of 25 members, appointed by the Speaker of the House, the Senate majority leader, the House minority leader, and the Senate minority leader. 2 U.S.C. §803(a)(1). The Board guides award activities through the appointment of a director by majority vote of the Board. In consultation with the board, the director "(1) formulate[s] programs to carry out the policies of the Congressional Award Program; (2) establish[es] such divisions within the Congressional Award Program as may be appropriate; and (3) employ[es] and provide[s] for the compensation of such personnel as may be necessary to carry out the Congressional Award Program, subject to such policies as the Board shall prescribe under its bylaws." 2 U.S.C. §804(b).

[3] 2 U.S.C. §802(a).

[4] 2 U.S.C. §802(f).

[5] 2 U.S.C. §802(a).

[6] 2 U.S.C. §802(c).

[7] 2 U.S.C. §802(d).

[8] Congressional Award, "Gold Medal Ceremony," *Annual Gold Medal Ceremony*, at https://www.congressionalaward.org/events/annual-gold-medal-ceremony.

[9] Congressional Award, "Gain Inspiration for your goal," *Activities*, at https://www.congressionalaward.org/activities.

[10] Congressional Award, *The Program*, at https://www.congressionalaward.org/the-program.

[11] Ibid.

[12] Ibid.

E-mail: information@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 awarded by the Continental Congress, the Congressional Gold Medal is considered "the nation's highest civilian award and the most distinguished award" given by the U.S. Congress. In the past, Congress has awarded a Congressional Gold Medal to recognize a lifetime contribution or a singular achievement. The U.S. Mint is statutorily authorized to design and strike each Congressional Gold Medal, and to produce and sell duplicate bronze medals.[13]

An act of Congress, signed by the President, is required to award a Congressional Gold Medal. Each gold medal has historically been authorized through stand-alone legislation. Unless otherwise specified in law, a single gold medal is struck. Individual recipients receive the gold medal. For groups, the statutory authorization often specifies where the gold medal is to be housed after being awarded. In many cases, the Smithsonian Institution receives the medal.[14] Additional information on Congressional Gold Medals, including a list of recipients and the authorization process, is provided in CRS Report R45101, *Congressional Gold Medals: Background, Legislative Process, and Issues for Congress*.[15]

Medal of Honor

This award, the nation's highest military honor, is presented by the President "in the name of Congress," and for that reason is sometimes referred to as the Congressional Medal of Honor.[16]

The Medal of Honor was established by Congress 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."[17] Recommendations for the Medal of Honor are generally made by the military commander or others on the scene at the time of the act. These recommendations are reviewed by the Department of Defense (DOD), which makes the final determination on military awards.[18] In addition to the prestige associated

[13] For example, the U.S. Mint was authorized to sell bronze duplicates of the Congressional Gold Medal for the Tuskegee Airmen. Full size (3-inch) duplicates were sold for $160 and half-size (1.5 inches) are sold for $20. U.S. Mint, "Tuskegee Airmen Bronze Medal 3 Inch," at https://catalog.usmint.gov/tuskegee-airmen-bronze-medal-3-inch-903.html ; and U.S. Mint, "Tuskegee Airmen Bronze Medal 1.5 Inch," at https://catalog.usmint.gov/tuskegee-airmen-bronze-medal-1-and-one-half-inch-904.html. For more information on duplicate medals, see CRS In Focus IF10934, *Duplicate Congressional Gold Medals: Frequently Asked Questions*, by Jacob R. Straus.

[14] For example, the Tuskegee Airmen Congressional Gold Medal is part of the National Museum of African American History and Culture's collections and is on loan to the National Air and Space Museum. See Smithsonian Institution, "Congressional Gold Medal, Tuskegee Airmen," at https://www.si.edu/object/congressional-gold-medal-tuskegee-airmen:nasm_I20071282001#:~:text=The%20Congressional%20Gold%20Medal%20is,interest%20of%20the%20United%20States.

[15] For additional guidance for congressional offices, contact the author Jacob Straus who contributed information to this section.

[16] Congressional Medal of Honor Society (CMOHS), "The Medal Overview" section at https://www.cmohs.org/medal.

[17] 10 U.S.C. §9271. Medal of Honor: Award.

[18] See DOD Manual 1348.33, Volume 1, *Manual of Military Decorations and Awards: Medal of Honor*, at https://www.esd.whs.mil/Portals/54/Documents/DD/issuances/dodm/134833_Vol1.PDF.

with the Medal of Honor, recipients receive additional courtesies and benefits, including a monthly pension of $1,489.73 and access to certain military benefits.[19]

A detailed history, current procedures for award of the Medal, and a list of privileges afforded to recipients are provided in CRS Report 95-519, *Medal of Honor: History and Issues*.

Presidential Awards

Presidential Medal of Freedom

The Presidential Medal of Freedom is considered the highest civilian award of the United States government. President Truman first awarded the Medal of Freedom to reward war-connected acts or services performed during World War II. It was later re-established by President Kennedy in Executive Order 11085 of February 22, 1963, to recognize persons who have made especially meritorious contributions to the security or national interests of the United States; to world peace; or to cultural or other significant public or private endeavors. There are two degrees of the Medal, the higher being the Presidential Medal of Freedom with distinction.

Honorees are selected solely by the President, either acting on his own initiative or based on recommendations made to him. 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. The award is presented by the President, generally at a White House ceremony, and may be awarded posthumously. Lists of Presidential Medal of Freedom recipients are available online and in several books, such as the annual *Time Almanac* and *The Presidential Medal of Freedom*.

Presidential Citizens Medal

In Executive Order 11494 of November 13, 1969, President Nixon established the Presidential Citizens Medal to recognize U.S. citizens who have performed exemplary deeds of service for their country or fellow citizens. It is generally considered the second highest civilian award of our government. The Presidential Citizens Medal is bestowed at the sole discretion of the President and is usually presented by the President. Past recipients were recognized for their contributions in a variety of areas, including human rights, the civil rights movement, national security, space exploration, religion, government service, and the environment. The Medal may be awarded posthumously. To make a nomination for either the Presidential Medal of Freedom or the Presidential Citizens Medal, a letter detailing the accomplishments of the nominee may be sent to the following:

> Executive Office of the President
> The White House
> ATTN: Executive Clerk's Office
> Washington, DC 20502
> https://www.whitehouse.gov/contact/

[19] See 38 CFR §3.802 Medal of Honor for information on benefits; and the 2022 Medal of Honor pension rate as of December 21, 2021, at https://www.va.gov/disability/compensation-rates/special-benefit-allowance-rates/.

Additional Awards and Medals

Other presidential awards include the following:

- Enrico Fermi Award recognizing contributions in the field of nuclear energy (Department of Energy) at https://science.osti.gov/fermi;
- "E" and "E Star" Awards recognizing contributions to export expansion efforts (Department of Commerce) at https://www.commerce.gov/tags/e-awards;
- Malcolm Baldrige National Quality Award recognizing organizations for their achievements in quality and business performance (National Institute of Standards and Technology) at https://www.nist.gov/baldrige;
- Presidential Award for Excellence in Mathematics and Science Teaching PAEMST (National Science Foundation) at https://www.paemst.org/;
- Presidential Rank Award and President's Award for Distinguished Federal Civilian Service (Office of Personnel Management) at https://www.opm.gov/policy-data-oversight/performance-management/performance-management-cycle/rewarding/the-presidents-award-for-distinguished-federal-civilian-service/; and
- President's Environmental Youth Award (Environmental Protection Agency) at https://www.epa.gov/education/presidents-environmental-youth-award.

In addition, special awards may be established to grant presidential recognition to persons or organizations for whom other categories of awards are not appropriate. Numerous other awards are authorized and may be presented by the President. See selected medals summarized below.

Table 1. Selected Medals

Award or Medal	Contact Information	Purpose
Congressional Space Medal of Honor (P.L. 91-76) 51 U.S.C. §30901	Administrator of the National Aeronautics and Space Administration (NASA) https://history.nasa.gov/spacemedal.htm Email: hq-histinfo@nasa.gov	Awarded to astronauts "whose particular efforts and meritorious contributions to the welfare of the nation and mankind have been exceptional." Recommendations are made by the administrator of NASA to the President, who may award and present the award in the name of Congress.
National Medal of Science (Public Law 86-209) 42 U.S.C. §1881	National Medal of Science https://www.nsf.gov/od/nms/medal.jsp Nominations may be submitted through an online portal at: https://www.fastlane.nsf.gov/honawards/ Email: nms@nsf.gov	Awarded to individuals whose accumulated work has had a particularly significant impact on the present state of the physical, biological, mathematical, engineering, or social and behavioral sciences or that is deemed likely to strongly influence the future development of scientific thought.

National Medal of Technology (P.L. 96-480)	National Medal of Technology and Innovation (NMTI) https://www.uspto.gov/learning-and-resources/ip-programs-and-awards/national-medal-technology-and-innovation-nmti Email: nmti@uspto.gov	Awarded to individuals, teams, or companies for accomplishments in the innovation, development, commercialization, and management of technology, as evidenced by the establishment of new or significantly improved products, processes, or services.
National Security Medal (Executive Order 10431)	Executive Secretary of the National Security Council http://www.whitehouse.gov/nsc	Recognizes exceptionally meritorious service performed in a position of high responsibility or an act of valor requiring personal courage of a high degree and complete disregard of personal safety. Any individual may recommend a potential recipient as a candidate for the award to the Executive Secretary of the National Security Council.
Public Safety Officer Medal of Valor Act of 2001 (P.L. 107-12)	U.S. Department of Justice https://bja.ojp.gov/program/medalofvalor	Awarded to public safety officers judged to have shown extraordinary valor above and beyond the call of duty in the exercise of their official duties. Nominations must be submitted through the online Medal of Valor Nomination System.

Sources: Official websites of selected federal agencies and Congress.gov.

Author Information

Barbara Salazar Torreon
Senior Research Librarian

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