

The Presidential Medal of Freedom is one of the highest civilian honors awarded by the United States government. It is presented by the president to people whose work has made an exceptional contribution to the security or national interests of the United States, world peace, culture or another important public or private endeavor. A recipient does not have to be a government employee, military veteran or American citizen. The medal can recognize a lifetime of service or a particular achievement that changed the country or the world. It may also be awarded after the recipient has died.

The medal is described as a civilian honor because it is not based on military rank or combat service. Military members can receive it, but they are usually recognized for contributions extending beyond ordinary military duty. A retired general, for example, might receive the medal for diplomacy, public leadership or decades of national service. The word “civilian” describes the nature of the award, not necessarily the employment history of every recipient. It should not be confused with the Medal of Honor, which is a military decoration for extraordinary valor under extremely dangerous combat conditions.

The modern Presidential Medal of Freedom was established by President John F. Kennedy on February 22, 1963. Kennedy created it through Executive Order 11085, expanding an earlier award simply called the Medal of Freedom. The date was George Washington’s birthday, connecting the new medal with public service and the country’s founding history. Kennedy wanted the honor to recognize achievement across a broad range of human activity. Science, education, civil rights, business, public service, literature, music, sports and humanitarian work could all qualify.

The earlier Medal of Freedom had been created by President Harry Truman in 1945 near the end of World War II. It mainly honored civilians who had provided important assistance to the United States or its allies during the war. Recipients included people who supported military operations, intelligence, resistance movements and wartime administration. Kennedy transformed that more limited wartime decoration into a wider national honor. The new version could recognize work performed during peace as well as war.

Kennedy selected the first group of recipients under the new system, but he was assassinated before he could personally conduct the ceremony. President Lyndon B. Johnson carried out the presentation in December 1963. This gave the first ceremony an emotional weight that had not been intended when the medal was created. The country was mourning Kennedy while honoring individuals he had selected. The award immediately became connected with both national achievement and national memory.

The legal standard for receiving the medal is intentionally broad. A person may be honored for protecting the United States, advancing peace, improving culture or making another significant contribution to society. The contribution can occur in public or private life. A scientist who develops a lifesaving treatment, a civil-rights leader who

changes national law, an athlete who breaks racial barriers and an artist who transforms American culture could all qualify. The award does not measure every form of greatness with the same ruler.

The president has extensive discretion over the selection process. Congress does not have to approve each recipient, and the Senate does not hold a confirmation hearing. There is no national election or required public vote. White House staff, advisers, organizations and private citizens may recommend names, but the final decision belongs to the president. This makes the award flexible, but it also makes it political.

There is no fixed number of medals that must be presented each year. A president may award many during one ceremony, recognize only a few people or go through a period without presenting any. Some presidents use the medal frequently, while others use it more selectively. The number of recipients may also increase near the end of a presidential term. A departing president may want to recognize people whose work reflects the administration's priorities before leaving office.

The president does not have to select only people who agree with the administration. Presidents have honored members of opposing political parties, former rivals and individuals who publicly criticized them. These selections can communicate respect across political differences. Other presidents have used the medal to honor close allies, advisers and ideological supporters. The same presidential discretion that permits generosity also permits favoritism.

The award is usually presented during a White House ceremony. A military aide reads a citation explaining the recipient's achievements, and the president places the medal around the person's neck. The ceremony is formal, but it often includes personal stories, humor and emotional responses. Family members may attend, especially when the recipient is elderly or being honored posthumously. When a person has died, a relative normally accepts the medal.

The medal's design contains several American symbols. The main badge includes a white star placed over a red shape, with a blue center surrounded by gold stars. It hangs from a blue ribbon decorated with white details. The colors connect the medal visually with the national flag. The design is immediately recognizable during ceremonies, although its real value comes from what the government is saying about the recipient's contribution.

A special version called the Presidential Medal of Freedom with Distinction can be awarded in particularly exceptional cases. It includes additional insignia and is much rarer than the ordinary medal. The distinction is not automatically given to the most famous person at a ceremony. It represents an elevated grade within the honor. Because presidents use it infrequently, it carries an additional level of symbolic importance.

Receiving the medal does not come with prize money, a government salary or political authority. The recipient does not gain immunity from prosecution, a special tax exemption or the power to make federal decisions. It is an honor rather than a legal office. Its value comes from national recognition, historical meaning and the prestige of receiving it directly from the president. The recipient may display the medal, include the honor in a biography and be remembered in official records.

The Presidential Medal of Freedom and the Congressional Gold Medal are sometimes confused. The Presidential Medal of Freedom is selected and awarded by the president under executive authority. A Congressional Gold Medal requires Congress to pass specific legislation, which the president ordinarily signs into law. The Congressional Gold Medal is usually designed individually for a person or event and is not worn around the neck. Both are major civilian honors, but they come from different branches of government.

The Presidential Citizens Medal is another separate honor. It was established in 1969 and recognizes citizens who have performed exemplary deeds or services for the country or other citizens. It is generally considered below the Presidential Medal of Freedom in the order of civilian honors. The Citizens Medal often recognizes extraordinary service that may not have produced the same national or international influence associated with the Medal of Freedom. Both are awarded by the president, which explains why people sometimes mix them together.

The Medal of Honor is completely different. It is the nation's highest military decoration and is associated with extraordinary bravery in combat. The president presents it in the name of Congress, but the recipient must meet demanding military requirements. The Presidential Medal of Freedom cannot be treated as a civilian version of combat valor. They honor different forms of contribution and sacrifice.

Civil-rights leaders have received the Presidential Medal of Freedom because changing the meaning of American citizenship is a national contribution. Rosa Parks was honored for refusing to surrender her bus seat and for the larger lifetime of activism surrounding that moment. Martin Luther King Jr. received the medal posthumously for leadership that helped move the country toward civil and voting rights. Bayard Rustin, who organized the 1963 March on Washington, was also recognized after his death. These awards placed Black freedom work inside the country's official account of national service.

The recognition often came long after the recipients had been treated as threats. King was monitored by the federal government, attacked by political leaders and eventually assassinated. Parks lost her job and experienced financial hardship after the Montgomery bus boycott. Rustin was pushed into the background because he was openly gay and had previously belonged to a communist youth organization. Awarding them the medal showed national respect, but it could not erase what the country allowed them to endure.

Frederick Douglass received the medal posthumously in 2025, more than a century after his death. His selection recognized his work as an abolitionist, writer, speaker, newspaper publisher and defender of women's rights. The long delay illustrates how national honors can reach backward and repair gaps in public memory. Douglass did not need a modern medal to establish his importance. The government needed to formally acknowledge that his challenge to the nation was itself a form of service.

Other Black recipients have represented literature, music, sports, science, education and public leadership. Maya Angelou was honored for writing that transformed personal pain, Black history and human resilience into literature. Aretha Franklin received the medal for a musical career that became deeply connected with gospel, soul, women's power and the civil-rights movement. Muhammad Ali was recognized not only as a boxer but as a figure who accepted enormous consequences for his convictions. Jackie Robinson received the medal posthumously for changing professional sports and confronting segregation.

The medal has also recognized artists such as Duke Ellington, Ella Fitzgerald and Sidney Poitier. Their work did more than entertain audiences. Ellington demonstrated the depth and range of Black composition, Fitzgerald established one of the greatest vocal careers in American music, and Poitier broke barriers in film while carrying the burden of representing Black dignity before audiences accustomed to stereotypes. Cultural achievement can shift how a nation sees itself. That influence can be as lasting as a law or political office.

Scientists and medical leaders have received the medal because their discoveries protected life on a national or worldwide scale. Jonas Salk was honored for developing the first widely successful polio vaccine. Katherine Johnson received it for mathematical work that helped make American spaceflight possible. Her calculations supported missions while she worked inside institutions marked by racial and gender discrimination. The medal recognized both the technical achievement and the barriers she overcame.

Athletes may receive the medal when their influence extends beyond winning games. Jesse Owens defeated elite competitors at the 1936 Berlin Olympics while Adolf Hitler's government was promoting ideas of Aryan racial superiority. Billie Jean King advanced women's sports and fought for equality. Arthur Ashe combined tennis success with civil-rights work, education and HIV/AIDS awareness. Their athletic records mattered, but the wider social impact made them national figures.

Entertainers can receive the medal because music, film, comedy and television influence national identity. An artist may create work that becomes part of how generations understand love, race, war, family or American life. Popularity alone does not automatically qualify someone, but cultural reach can be a legitimate public contribution. The difficulty is deciding when commercial success becomes historically significant. Different presidents will answer that question differently.

Business leaders and philanthropists have also been selected. A businessperson may be recognized for innovation, job creation, technology, charitable giving or building an institution that affects millions of lives. Wealth alone is not supposed to be enough. The citation usually presents the recipient's larger contribution to society. Still, honoring wealthy donors can create suspicion when those donors also possess political access.

Foreign citizens can receive the Presidential Medal of Freedom because the standard includes contributions to world peace and American interests. International leaders, religious figures, humanitarians and opponents of dictatorship have been honored. Nelson Mandela, Pope John Paul II, Mother Teresa and Margaret Thatcher are examples of internationally known recipients. The medal can function as diplomacy by showing respect for an ally or a person whose work the United States wants to support.

Awarding a foreign leader does not make the person an American citizen. It also does not create a treaty or official military alliance. The honor sends a symbolic message about shared values, friendship or historical cooperation. Symbolism matters in international relations because governments communicate through ceremonies as well as laws. A medal can strengthen a relationship without carrying the force of a legal agreement.

The medal can be awarded to the same person more than once. A second award may recognize a new achievement or elevate the person's place in national history. Repeat awards are uncommon because the first medal already provides the country's highest level of civilian recognition. When they occur, they show that the recipient's relationship with American public life has continued to develop. They also reflect the priorities of different presidents.

A person can decline the honor. The medal is not forced upon anyone, and a potential recipient may refuse because of health, scheduling, personal belief or disagreement with the administration. Declining does not automatically mean the person rejects the country. Accepting does not mean the recipient agrees with every policy of the president presenting it. The ceremony recognizes a contribution, not a complete political partnership.

The medal is sometimes awarded posthumously because national recognition often arrives too late. A posthumous award can introduce younger generations to someone whose work was ignored or undervalued during life. It can also expose an uncomfortable truth: the nation may praise a person after death for taking positions it punished while that person was alive. Official honor is easier once the recipient can no longer challenge those in power. That does not make the recognition meaningless, but it should make the history more honest.

Presidents frequently use the medal to tell a story about America. A group of recipients may include a civil-rights leader, scientist, athlete, entertainer, military figure and public servant. Together, they present a picture of what the administration believes national greatness looks like. One president may emphasize bipartisanship and public service,

while another emphasizes business, military strength or cultural influence. The list becomes a record of presidential values.

This storytelling power creates controversy. Because the president controls the selection, there is no guarantee that recipients will have broad national approval. A person celebrated by one political group may be considered harmful by another. Some selections appear to reward personal loyalty rather than lifetime achievement. Others produce criticism because the recipient's conduct outside the honored work conflicts with the dignity associated with the medal.

The medal does not certify that someone lived a perfect life. A recipient may have made harmful decisions, mistreated people or held views later condemned by society. The award recognizes a contribution identified by the president, not moral perfection in every area. This distinction becomes especially important when serious accusations or evidence emerge after a medal has been awarded. A national honor can recognize real achievement while the person's full record remains complicated.

There is no ordinary, clearly established process for taking the medal back. Calls for revocation have occurred when recipients later became involved in scandal or criminal accusations. The executive order creating the medal provides broad power to award it but does not establish a detailed revocation system. A later president could attempt to address the issue, but removing a historical award would raise legal and political questions. In practice, the government has generally allowed the record to show both the honor and the later controversy.

This does not mean an award permanently protects someone's reputation. Museums, historians, journalists and the public can reevaluate a recipient. A person's official citation may describe the achievement that was recognized, while later accounts explain information that changed the public's understanding. History does not have to choose between pretending the medal never existed and pretending the recipient did nothing wrong. Both parts belong in the record.

The selection process also reveals who has historically been overlooked. For much of American history, women, Black Americans, Native Americans, Latino Americans, Asian Americans, people with disabilities and LGBTQ figures received less public recognition than white men with similar influence. Later presidents have attempted to correct some of those omissions through posthumous and living awards. Corrective recognition matters, but it cannot restore lost opportunities or compensate for generations of exclusion.

A Medal of Freedom ceremony can therefore represent progress and unfinished business at the same time. Honoring a Black scientist may finally place her achievements before the country, but the ceremony may also reveal that her work was ignored for decades. Honoring a Native American activist may recognize courage while leaving unresolved the government policies the activist opposed. National recognition becomes most

meaningful when it encourages the country to study the complete struggle rather than celebrate a safe version of it.

The president does not personally create the achievements being honored. The White House is officially recognizing work that often began far away from political power. A teacher may have spent decades educating children, a physician may have served poor communities, or an activist may have challenged the same federal government later presenting the medal. The ceremony brings that work into a national setting. It does not replace the years of labor that made the ceremony possible.

The medal also demonstrates that service can occur outside government. A novelist can serve the nation by expanding its imagination. A musician can preserve a cultural tradition. A journalist can expose wrongdoing, and a scientist can prevent disease. Public contribution is larger than holding office. The award's broad design allows different forms of work to be treated as part of national life.

Fame and contribution are not the same, even though famous people frequently receive the medal. Some highly influential recipients are unknown to much of the public before the ceremony. Others are recognized everywhere they go. A thoughtful selection process asks what the person changed, built, protected or revealed. Celebrity may increase visibility, but visibility by itself should not be mistaken for service.

The Presidential Medal of Freedom carries no power to repair every injustice connected to a person's life. It cannot return years lost to segregation, persecution, illness or poverty. It cannot undo a government investigation against an activist or restore credit stolen from a scientist. What it can do is place the authority of the presidency behind a public statement that the person's work belongs in the national memory. That statement can influence how future generations study the individual.

Its meaning ultimately rests on two records. One is the record of the recipient: the work, sacrifice, achievement and human complications. The other is the record of the president who selected that person. Studying both prevents the medal from becoming empty decoration. The honor tells us whom the country chose to celebrate, what contribution it valued and whether the recognition arrived during courage or only after courage became safe.