

# [***Biden awards the Medal of Freedom to Nancy Pelosi, Medgar Evers, Michelle Yeoh and 16 others***](https://advance.lexis.com/api/document?collection=news&id=urn:contentItem:6BYH-WCV1-JC5B-G3T9-00000-00&context=1516831)

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**Body**

WASHINGTON — President Joe Biden on Friday bestowed the Presidential Medal of Freedom on 19 people, including civil rights icons such as the late Medgar Evers, prominent political leaders such as former House Speaker Nancy Pelosi and Rep. James Clyburn, and actor Michelle Yeoh.

Biden said the recipients of the nation's highest civilian honor are “incredible people whose relentless curiosity, inventiveness, ingenuity and hope have kept faith in a better tomorrow.”

One of them, Clarence B. Jones, said in an interview that he thought a prankster was on the phone when he answered and heard the caller say they were from the White House.

“I said, ‘Is this a joke or is this serious?’" Jones recalled. The caller swore they were serious and was calling with the news that Biden wanted to recognize Jones with the medal.

Jones, 93, was honored for his activism during the Civil Rights Movement. He's a lawyer who provided legal counsel to Martin Luther King Jr. and helped write the opening paragraphs of the [*“I Have a Dream” speech*](https://apnews.com/article/martin-luther-king-dream-speech-civil-rights-6d64ab03e51826a977c1434092c46a92) that King delivered at the Lincoln Memorial at the 1963 March on Washington.

The White House said the recipients are “exemplary contributions to the prosperity, values, or security of the United States, world peace, or other significant societal, public or private endeavors.”

The 10 men and nine women hail from the worlds of ***politics***, sports, entertainment, civil rights and LGBTQ+ advocacy, science and religion. Three medals were awarded posthumously.

Seven politicians were among the recipients: former New York mayor and philanthropist [*Michael Bloomberg*](https://apnews.com/article/election-2020-joe-biden-donald-trump-new-york-florida-69ea789b660ede5999388be6edc615d6), former Sen. Elizabeth Dole, climate activist and former Vice President [*Al Gore*](https://apnews.com/article/al-gore-climate-change-oil-company-cop28-ec565d495075ed6b9c0171c1675db8f4), Biden's former climate envoy [*John Kerry*](https://apnews.com/article/john-kerry-joe-biden-15cfbe0c5879609a489b1abf0d2bf986), former Sen. Frank Lautenberg, D-N.J., who died in 2013, Clyburn, the Democratic congressman from South Carolina, and [*Pelosi*](https://apnews.com/article/ap-top-news-nancy-pelosi-congress-government-and-politics-6b5491959b8fdc469ef1dab012a17444), the Democratic congresswoman from California.

Biden in his remarks acknowledged that Clyburn's [*endorsement*](https://apnews.com/article/2cff5212f4410ec80ec1d520463cbd9b) in the 2020 Democratic presidential primary helped him score a thundering win in South Carolina, powering him to his party's nomination and ultimately the White House. Bloomberg mounted a short-lived bid for the 2020 Democratic presidential nomination.

“I can say this without fear of contradiction,” Biden said. “I would not be standing here as president making these awards were it not for Jim. I mean that sincerely.”

In addition to representing North Carolina in the Senate, Dole, a Republican and the widow of former Sen. Bob Dole, also served as transportation secretary and labor secretary and was president of the American Red Cross. She currently leads a foundation supporting military caregivers.

Pelosi is the first and only woman ever elected to the speaker's post, putting her second in the line of succession to the presidency. Biden referenced her legislative achievements, noted her actions during the Capitol insurrection on Jan. 6, 2021, and said "history will remember you, Nancy, as the greatest speaker of the House of Representatives.”

[*Evers*](https://apnews.com/article/mississippi-medgar-evers-presidential-medal-of-freedom-08aa59e087705dbf64b09ee9e151221f) received posthumous recognition for his work more than six decades ago fighting segregation in Mississippi in the 1960s as the NAACP's first field officer in the state. He was 37 when he was fatally shot in the driveway of his home in June 1963. His daughter, Reena, who was 8 years old when her father was killed, accepted his medal.

[*Yeoh*](https://apnews.com/article/oscars-2023-best-actress-a79c3ca0a834d040f6f0232050fd0ef1) made history last year by becoming the first Asian woman to win an Academy Award for best actress for her performance in “ [*Everything, Everywhere All at Once*](https://apnews.com/article/oscars-2023-best-picture-everything-everywhere-all-at-once-c6db5dc1477c28e2b9e41270a036ac12).”

[*Jim Thorpe*](https://apnews.com/article/winter-olympics-sports-native-americans-stockholm-sweden-5cbe83bde828487ce2f82e3066850d85), who died in 1953, was the first Native American to win an Olympic gold medal for the United States.

Judy Shepard co-founded the [*Matthew Shepard*](https://apnews.com/article/matthew-shepard-lgbtq-rights-db6142ccc885a86dde5e4eeb9f42b539) Foundation, named after her son, a gay 21-year-old University of Wyoming student who died in 1998 after he was beaten and tied to a fence.

Jones said he felt “very touched” after he digested what the caller had said.

“I'm 93 years old with some health challenges, but I woke up this morning thanks to the grace of God,” he told The Associated Press in a telephone interview Thursday. “I'm looking forward to whatever the White House would like for me to do.”

The other medal recipients are:

— Gregory Boyle, a Jesuit Catholic priest who founded and runs Homeboy Industries, a gang-intervention and rehabilitation program.

— Phil Donahue, a journalist and former daytime TV talk-show host.

— [*Katie Ledecky*](https://apnews.com/article/ledecky-swimming-world-championships-japan-murphy-dcf33b71d402ce748a62731a9ba637ac), the most decorated female swimmer in history.

— [*Opal Lee*](https://apnews.com/article/opal-lee-new-house-racist-mob-fort-worth-texas-d06e8163c65abaee8569957a5d97092e), an activist who is best known for pushing to make Juneteenth a federal holiday. Biden did so in 2021.

— Ellen Ochoa, the first Hispanic woman in space and the second female director of NASA's Johnson Space Center.

— Jane Rigby, an astronomer who is chief scientist of the world's most powerful telescope. She grew up in Delaware, Biden's home state.

— Teresa Romero, president of the [*United Farm Workers*](https://apnews.com/article/biden-farm-workers-union-endorsement-2024-labor-issues-b3259c0bfaede763c122e53c505ffa82) and the first Hispanic woman to lead a national union in the U.S. The union has endorsed Biden's reelection bid and backed him in 2020.

In 2022, Biden presented the Presidential Medal of Freedom to 17 people, including gymnast [*Simone Biles*](https://apnews.com/article/2020-tokyo-olympics-gymnastics-sports-college-sports-health-9169b6c48f8fd14ac130bc6504ce37b5), the late Sen. [*John McCain,*](https://apnews.com/article/eb2275d97afe4b4fa1a1e8b18ecf38ae) R-Ariz., and gun-control advocate [*Gabby Giffords*](https://apnews.com/article/us-supreme-court-politics-entertainment-shootings-arizona-3b290d8596a2fa3211b62866771690a6).

Biden knows how it feels to receive the medal. As president, Barack Obama [*presented Biden*](https://apnews.com/united-states-government-22492a519ffe4a52b19004c3e084d931), his vice president, with the medal a week before their administration ended in 2017.

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The story has been corrected to reflect in the headline that a total of 19 people, not 18, were honored.

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