

Dorothy I. Height Receives Congressional Gold Medal

Since the American Revolution, Congress has commissioned gold medals as its highest expression of national appreciation for distinguished achievements and contributions. Each medal honors a particular individual, institution, or event. Although the first recipients included citizens who participated in the American Revolution, the War of 1812 and the Mexican War, Congress broadened the scope of the medal to include actors, authors, entertainers, musicians, pioneers in aeronautical and space, explorers, lifesavers, notables in science and medicine, athletes, humanitarians, public servants, and foreign recipients.

In addition to the requirement that all Congressional Gold Medal legislation must be cosponsored by at least two-thirds (290) of the Members of the House, specific standards are set forth by Rule VII (c)(vii) of the House Committee on Banking and Financial Service's Subcommittee on Domestic and International Monetary Policy when considering such legislation. Additionally, the Senate Banking, Housing and Urban Affairs Committee requires that at least 67 Senators must cosponsor any Congressional Gold Medal legislation before the committee will consider it.

Some of the past distinguished recipients of this honorable award are:

- George Washington, 3/25/1776
- Charles A. Lindbergh, 5/4/1928
- Thomas A. Edison, 5/29/1928
- Doctor Jonas E. Salk, 8/8/1955
- Robert Frost, 9/13/1960
- Sir. Winston Churchill, 5/7/1969
- Robert F. Kennedy, 11/1/1978
- Joe Louis, 8/26/1982
- Lady Bird Johnson, 5/8/1984
- Roy Wilkins, 5/17/ 984
- Jesse Owens, 9/20/1988
- General Colin Powell, 4/23/1991
- Mother Teresa of Calcutta, 6/2/1997
- Little Rock Nine, 10/21/1998
- Rosa Parks, 5/4/1999

Dorothy Height was always in the middle of the civil rights photos, right beside Martin Luther King Jr. or Bobby Kennedy or John Lewis. And when she was asked why, former labor secretary Alexis Herman told a jam-packed Capitol Rotunda yesterday, she responded, "I learned to stand in the center so I wouldn't be elbowed out of the picture."

Nobody was elbowing her yesterday as Height received the Congressional Gold Medal, the most distinguished form of recognition that Congress bestows on individuals. She sat beaming in her chair between President Bush and Speaker of the House Dennis Hastert (R-Ill.).

It was a dual celebration for Height, who also turned 92 yesterday.

"I've never had a birthday celebration like this," she told the crowd.

Bush praised Height for her "calming influence" but added, "Behind the grace, there's a will of steel." Indeed, he said, not only has she met with many past presidents, "She's told every president what she thinks since Dwight David Eisenhower."

In her recent memoir "Open Wide the Freedom Gates," Height describes marching through Times Square in 1936 to protest lynchings, and standing onstage with King during his 1963 "I Have a

Dream" speech.

She was the only woman to work intimately with the "Big Six," the group that brought the civil rights movement into the national consciousness. The six were King, Whitney Young, A. Philip Randolph, James Farmer, Roy Wilkins and Lewis, who's now a Democratic representative from Georgia.

At the ceremony, Rep. Elijah Cummings (D-Md.) called her the "Queen Mother of the civil rights movement," and Rep Diane Watson (D-Calif.), who penned the legislation for the award, referred to her as the "grand dame of the civil rights movement."

But it wasn't all about her civil rights heroics. "You should consider yourself blessed if you tasted her sweet potato soufflé," Herman said.

And Sen. Hillary Rodham Clinton (D-N.Y.) got one of the day's biggest rounds of applause when she declared, "Once again, Dr. Height is the best-dressed one in the entire room." Wearing a light blue suit and a signature colorful hat, Height smiled.

Height joins an eclectic crowd. George Washington was the first recipient in 1776; other honorees include Walt Disney, Winston Churchill, Jesse Owens, Frank Sinatra and Mother Teresa.

She still serves as chair and president emerita of the National Council of Negro Women; she was president from 1957 to 1998.

In the audience along with members of Congress were D.C. Mayor Anthony Williams, former vice presidential candidate Geraldine Ferraro; comedian Bill Cosby and wife Camille; and boxing magnate Don King.

The Rev. Jesse Jackson gave the benediction at a post-ceremony reception at the Library of Congress. He commented to a reporter that the Bush administration has failed to meet with civil rights leaders.

"It's ironic that they're honoring a civil rights icon when they basically have a closed-door policy on civil rights," he said. "That is the agony of the day. That is the irony of the day."

Cosby delivered some gentle ribbing at the reception. "She's 92 years old and she's still got the same clothes on," he quipped. "If you look at her graduating class at NYU -- if they're still alive they don't know they are. Dorothy Height knows she's alive."

Height adds the gold medal to the Presidential Medal of Freedom, the nation's highest civilian honor, which she received from President Bill Clinton in 1994. In 1989, she also received both the Franklin Delano Roosevelt Freedom Medal and, from President Ronald Reagan, the Citizens Medal Award.

"I keep them well protected," she said.