

Congress of the United States
Washington, DC 20515

September 18, 2020

The Honorable Adam Smith
Chairman
House Armed Services Committee
2216 Rayburn House Office Building
Washington, DC 20515

The Honorable James Inhofe
Chairman
Senate Armed Services Committee
228 Russell Senate Office Building
Washington, DC 20510

The Honorable Mac Thornberry
Ranking Member
House Armed Services Committee
2216 Rayburn House Office Building
Washington, DC 20515

The Honorable Jack Reed
Ranking Member
Senate Armed Services Committee
228 Russell Senate Office Building
Washington, DC 20510

Dear Chairmen Adam Smith and James Inhofe and Ranking Members Mac Thornberry and Jack Reed,

As you finalize the Fiscal Year 2021 National Defense Authorization Act (NDAA), we urge you to include Section 581 of H.R. 6395, the House-passed version of the FY 2021 NDAA, which would create, issue, and distribute a service medal to honor our nation's Atomic Veterans.

Between 1945 and 1962, about 225,000 members of our Armed Forces participated in hundreds of atmospheric nuclear weapons tests. These GIs became known as the Atomic Veterans. They were placed in extremely dangerous areas and constantly exposed to radiation in performance of their duties. Sworn to secrecy, they could not even speak of their service to their doctors.

Atomic Veterans have been recognized, identified and acknowledged as a discrete cohort of American veterans. In section 1112(c)(3) of title 38, U.S. code defines Atomic Veterans as members of our Armed Forces who participated in above-ground nuclear weapons testing; were part of the U.S. military occupation forces in or around Hiroshima and Nagasaki before 1946; or were held as POWs in or near Hiroshima or Nagasaki.

We know that there is a concern that providing such a service medal might establish an unwelcome precedent. We emphasize, however, that the Atomic Veterans have been recognized, identified and acknowledged, as noted above, under U.S. law as a discrete cohort of American veterans who cannot be compared to any other grouping of servicemembers. In fact, President Ronald Reagan designated July 16, 1983 as National Atomic Veterans' Day. Moreover, the Atomic Veterans have been identified by the Department of Justice for compensation under the Radiation Exposure Compensation Act of 1990; recognized as eligible for specialized testing and treatment by the Department of Veterans' Affairs; had a chapter dedicated to them describing their service and its lifetime effects in the landmark Advisory Committee on Human Radiation Experiments (ACHRE)

report; and were publicly acknowledged in the apology issued by President Clinton in October 3, 1995 upon release of the ACHRE final report.

In 2007, our allies Great Britain, New Zealand and Australia enacted their versions of the Atomic Veterans Medal Act, in which a special medal was authorized to honor their Atomic Veterans who served with the United States. Russia and Canada have followed suit, recognizing their Atomic Veterans. Regrettably, the Pentagon has remained silent on honoring their service, saying that to do so would require the DOD to issue similar medals to any and all military personnel who undertake hazardous duties, including first responders, medical personnel and firemen, even though our allies conferred service medals with no negative consequences. Therefore, it is in the hands of Congress to ensure this honorable recognition and not legitimize such a disrespectful excuse and inaccurate comparison.

The creation of an Atomic Veterans Service Medal has received overwhelming, unanimous bipartisan support in the House for years and this year the provision is included in the base text of the House FY 2021 NDAA.

Tragically, more than 80 percent of Atomic Veterans have already passed away *before* the COVID-19 pandemic, never having received this recognition. We are fearful of how many more we might lose to the pandemic because of their age and vulnerability. These veterans served honorably and kept a code of silence that most certainly led to many of them passing away all too soon. Past Administrations and Congresses have dealt with the thornier issues of legality and compensation. What remains is recognizing these veterans' duty, honor, sacrifice and faithful and selfless service to our nation.

Before it's too late, we urge you to include Section 581 of the House-passed NDAA to honor our nation's Atomic Veterans.

Thank you for your time and consideration of this urgent request.

Sincerely,



James P. McGovern
Member of Congress



Tom Emmer
Member of Congress



Lori Trahan
Member of Congress

/s/ Eleanor Holmes Norton
Member of Congress

/s/ Barbara Lee
Member of Congress

/s/ Richard E. Neal
Member of Congress

/s/ Peter Welch
Member of Congress

/s/ Eddie Bernice Johnson
Member of Congress

/s/ Emanuel Cleaver, II
Member of Congress

/s/ Marcy Kaptur
Member of Congress

/s/ Alcee L. Hastings
Member of Congress

/s/ Donald S. Beyer Jr.
Member of Congress

/s/ Jim Costa
Member of Congress

/s/ Bill Foster
Member of Congress

/s/ Ben Ray Luján
Member of Congress

/s/ Grace Meng
Member of Congress

/s/ Brian Fitzpatrick
Member of Congress

/s/ Abigail D. Spanberger
Member of Congress

/s/ Bill Keating
Member of Congress

/s/ André Carson
Member of Congress

/s/ Sheila Jackson Lee
Member of Congress

/s/ Steven Horsford
Member of Congress

/s/ Dina Titus
Member of Congress