

Congress of the United States

Washington, DC 20515

June 11, 2025

The Honorable Pete Hegseth
Secretary of Defense
U.S. Department of Defense
1000 Defense Pentagon
Washington, DC 20301-100

Dear Mr. Secretary:

We write to express our strong objections to your recent order to rename the United States Naval Ship Harvey Milk (T-AO-206).¹ This cruel, unnecessary decision, intentionally announced at the start of Pride Month, is not only an attempt to erase yet another pivotal moment in American history, but also an insult to countless LGBTQI+ service members and Veterans. Instead of wasting the Navy's time and taxpayer dollars, we demand that you immediately rescind your order regarding the USNS Harvey Milk and any plans to rename other vessels in the John Lewis-class fleet named after prominent civil rights leaders in our history.

Long before Harvey Milk became the first openly gay man elected to public office in California, he enlisted in the United States Navy Reserve as an officer candidate in 1951. The Navy's records show that Milk was "considered very good officer material," and his battalion commander wrote that Milk was "a good leader" and "outstanding."² After his appointment as a Navy Reserve officer, Milk served as an operations officer on the USS Chanticleer and the USS Kittiwake, seeing action during the Korean War.³

Lieutenant Milk was forced out of service and accepted an "Other Than Honorable" discharge when the Navy discovered his homosexuality.⁴ Yet he always said he was proud of his military service. As he entered local politics in San Francisco and became a community leader and advocate for LGBTQI+ rights, Milk's courage inspired countless Americans to confront bigotry and hate against LGBTQI+ people.

Naming the USNS Harvey Milk pays tribute to an American who dedicated and gave his life to serving our country in uniform and in public office. The U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs' website even recognizes that Milk's life and legacy "exemplified the Navy's core values" of honor, courage, and commitment.⁵ When the USNS Harvey Milk was commissioned in 2021, former Secretary of the Navy Carlos Del Toro rightfully acknowledged that, "for far too long,

¹ Konstantin Toropin, "Hegseth Orders Navy to Strip Name of Gay Rights Icon Harvey Milk from Ship," Military.com, June 3, 2025, <https://www.military.com/daily-news/2025/06/03/hegseth-orders-navy-strip-name-of-gay-rights-icon-harvey-milk-ship.html>.

² Jessie Kratz, "Harvey Milk: Veteran," National Archives Pieces of History, June 28, 2023, <https://prologue.blogs.archives.gov/2023/06/28/harvey-milk-veteran/>.

³ *Id.*

⁴ *Id.*

⁵ Calvin Wong, "Harvey Milk: Honor, courage and commitment," U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs, June 3, 2021, <https://news.va.gov/89713/harvey-milk-honor-courage-commitment/>.

sailors like Lt. Milk were forced into the shadows or, worse yet, forced out of our beloved Navy. That injustice is part of our Navy history, but so is the perseverance of all who continue to serve in the face of injustice.”⁶

Ordering this renaming and intentionally timing this announcement to coincide with Pride Month is a cruel insult to tens of thousands of LGBTQI+ individuals currently serving in our nation’s military and the nearly one million LGBTQI+ Veterans across the country.⁷ They have all raised their right hand to swear an oath to the Constitution, like you, as they each served and sacrificed on behalf of our nation. In fact, the Pride flag was designed by a Veteran. Combined with your harmful decision to remove transgender service members from the military, your order is just the latest slap in the face to service members and Veterans, regardless of their sexual orientation or gender identity, and sends the wrong signal that their service is not valued.

This renaming is also a waste of valuable time and resources. Under your leadership, staff have already spent unknown numbers of hours combing Department of Defense websites and censoring content that happens to mention words associated with minority communities—even marking references to the World War II aircraft *Enola Gay* for deletion because the aircraft’s name had the word “gay” in it.⁸ This time and energy would be better spent on investing in all service members, rather than targeting mentions of minority communities.

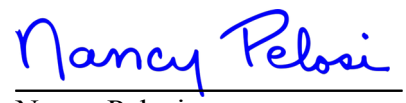
Alongside the planned renaming of Navy vessels named after other civil rights leaders in the John Lewis-class fleet, renaming the USNS Harvey Milk does nothing to “reestablish the warrior culture” or make America more safe and secure. Instead, these decisions merely serve to divide the most lethal and diverse military in history by creating barriers between our service members. It is actions like these that set a harmful and irresponsible precedent of politicizing our military and our Veterans.

For these reasons, we demand that you rescind your order to rename the USNS Harvey Milk and abandon any additional efforts to rename any Navy vessels named for other civil rights leaders in the John Lewis-class fleet.

Sincerely,



Jim Tokuda
Member of Congress



Nancy Pelosi
Member of Congress

⁶ “Harvey Milk: US Navy launches ship named for gay rights leader,” BBC News, November 7, 2021, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-us-canada-59196462>.

⁷ Lindsay Mahowald, “LGBTQ+ Military Members and Veterans Face Economic, Housing, and Health Insecurities,” Center for American Progress, April 28, 2022, <https://www.americanprogress.org/article/lgbtq-military-members-and-veterans-face-economic-housing-and-health-insecurities/>.

⁸ “War heroes and a 'gay' plane are among images flagged for removal in Pentagon’s DEI purge,” Associated Press, March 7, 2025, <https://www.nbcnews.com/nbc-out/out-politics-and-policy/war-heroes-gay-plane-images-flagged-removal-pentagons-dei-purge-rcna195344>.



Mark Takano
Member of Congress



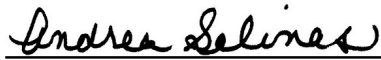
Lateefah Simon
Member of Congress



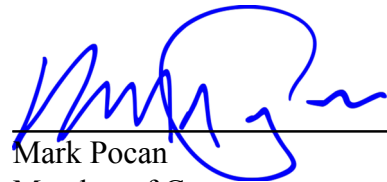
Marilyn Strickland
Member of Congress



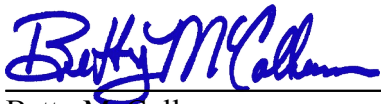
Eleanor Holmes Norton
Member of Congress



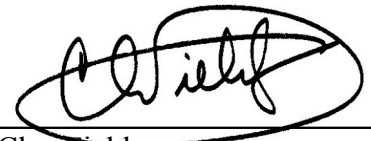
Andrea Salinas
Member of Congress



Mark Pocan
Member of Congress



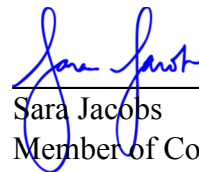
Betty McCollum
Member of Congress



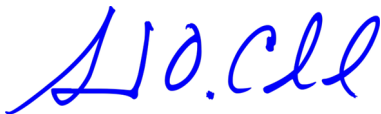
Cleo Fields
Member of Congress




Chrissy Houlahan
Member of Congress



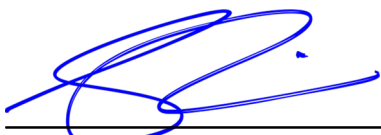
Sara Jacobs
Member of Congress



Salud Carbajal
Member of Congress



Ritchie Torres
Member of Congress



Sharice L. Davids
Member of Congress



Kevin Mullin
Member of Congress



Henry C. "Hank" Johnson, Jr.
Member of Congress



Wesley Bell
Member of Congress



Pramila Jayapal
Member of Congress



Rashida Tlaib
Member of Congress



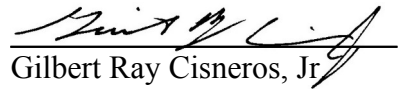
Emanuel Cleaver, II
Member of Congress



Dan Goldman
Member of Congress



Gwen S. Moore
Member of Congress



Gilbert Ray Cisneros, Jr.
Member of Congress



Josh Gottheimer
Member of Congress



James P. McGovern
Member of Congress



Delia C. Ramirez
Member of Congress



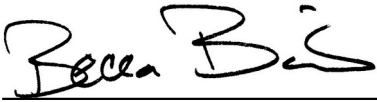
Robert Garcia
Member of Congress



Jerrold Nadler
Member of Congress




Nikema Williams
Member of Congress



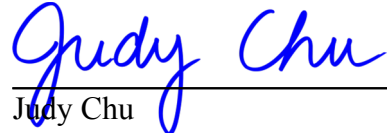
Becca Balint
Member of Congress



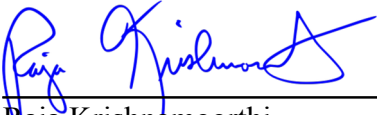
Paul D. Tonko
Member of Congress



Jan Schakowsky
Member of Congress



Judy Chu
Member of Congress



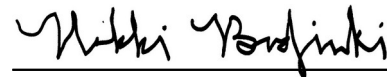
Raja Krishnamoorthi
Member of Congress



Summer L. Lee
Member of Congress




Scott H. Peters
Member of Congress



Nikki Budzinski
Member of Congress



Valerie P. Foushee
Member of Congress




Morgan McGarvey
Member of Congress



John Garamendi
Member of Congress



Jennifer L. McClellan
Member of Congress



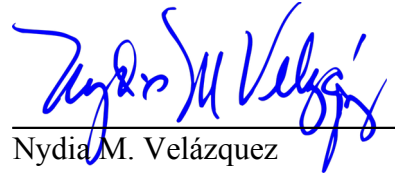
Angie Craig
Member of Congress



Sarah McBride
Member of Congress




Lizzie Fletcher
Member of Congress



Nydia M. Velázquez
Member of Congress



Julia Brownley
Member of Congress



Juan Vargas
Member of Congress



Mark DeSaulnier
Member of Congress



Suzan K. DelBene
Member of Congress



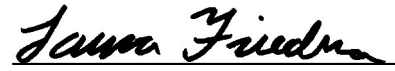
Jared Huffman
Member of Congress



Rick Larsen
Member of Congress



Julie Johnson
Member of Congress



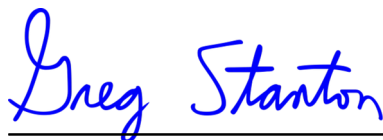
Laura Friedman
Member of Congress



Dwight Evans
Member of Congress



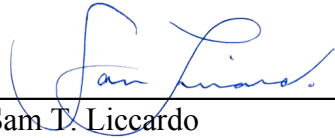
Gabe Amo
Member of Congress



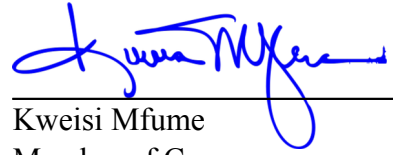
Greg Stanton
Member of Congress



Mike Levin
Member of Congress



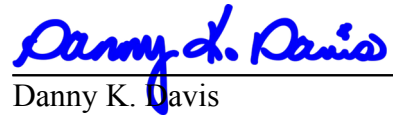
Sam T. Liccardo
Member of Congress



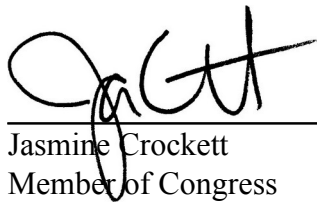
Kweisi Mfume
Member of Congress



Terri A. Sewell
Member of Congress



Danny K. Davis
Member of Congress



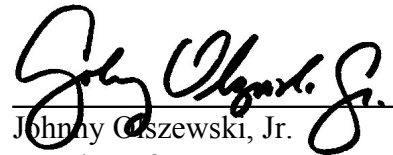
Jasmine Crockett
Member of Congress



Mike Thompson
Member of Congress



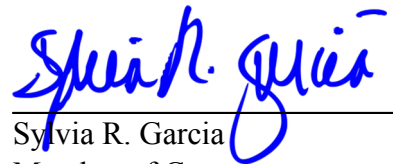
Bonnie Watson Coleman
Member of Congress



Johnny Ciszewski, Jr.
Member of Congress



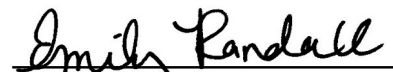
Madeleine Dean
Member of Congress



Sylvia R. Garcia
Member of Congress



Eric Sorensen
Member of Congress



Emily Randall
Member of Congress