

Congress of the United States

Washington, DC 20515

July 15, 2025

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

Dear Mr. Secretary,

We write to express our deep concern over reports that the United States Navy is considering renaming the USNS Cesar Chavez (T-AKE-14).¹ A Navy veteran, Cesar Chavez dedicated his life to advancing the dignity of farm workers, immigrants, and working-class families. Removing his name from a naval vessel would unnecessarily politicize the process of designating our ships, disregard his contributions, alienate tens of millions of proud Americans of Latino heritage, and waste taxpayer dollars. We urge you to preserve the name of the USNS Cesar Chavez.

The Department of Defense has established clear criteria for naming military assets: consider historical context, recognize national service, and minimize cost.² USNS Cesar Chavez meets those standards. In 1946, before becoming one of the most consequential labor leaders in American history, Cesar Chavez enlisted in the U.S. Navy at age 19 and was stationed in the Western Pacific.³ He served in a segregated unit, where he, like many Mexican American servicemembers, quietly endured discrimination—an experience that deepened his understanding of injustice and shaped his lifelong fight for dignity and equality.

After his honorable discharge, Chavez returned to California, where he became a grassroots organizer in San Jose with the Community Service Organization and began mobilizing working-class families through voter registration drives. In 1962, he co-founded the United Farm Workers—the first successful farm workers’ union in the United States. He spent the rest of his life fighting to improve wages, working conditions, and dignity for farm laborers through peaceful strikes, boycotts, and marches that brought national attention to the exploitation of farm workers. In 1994, Cesar Chavez received the Presidential Medal of Freedom for possessing “an unusually profound sense of responsibility to improve the lives of their fellow men and women, to improve the future for our children, to embody the best of what we mean by the term ‘American citizen.’”⁴ For countless Latinos, immigrants, and working families, his legacy remains a symbol of leadership and sacrifice.

In 2011, the Navy honored Cesar Chavez by naming a ship after him—a long-overdue recognition that service to our country does not end with military duty, and it includes fighting for justice at home. As former Secretary of the Navy Ray Mabus said, “Cesar Chavez inspired young Americans to do what is right and what is

1 Eleanor Watson, James LaPorta, Mary Walsh, and Nikole Killion, “Navy Set to Rename USNS Harvey Milk, Mulls New Names for Other Ships Named for Civil Rights Leaders,” *CBS News*, June 3, 2025, <https://www.cbsnews.com/news/navy-new-name-usns-harvey-milk-ships-named-for-civil-rights-leaders/>.

2 “Final Report to Congress, Part III: Renaming Department of Defense Assets,” *The Naming Commission*, September 19, 2022, <https://cybercoe.army.mil/Portals/131/Naming%20Commission%20Report%20Part%203.pdf?ver=OaH4890ADrSIqc9PT4cYQ%3D%3D>.

3 “Civil Rights Activist Cesar Chavez,” Naval History and Heritage Command, June 21, 2024, <https://www.history.navy.mil/browse-by-topic/people/namesakes/cesar-chavez.html>.

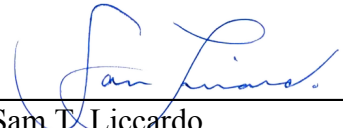
4 William J. Clinton, “Remarks on Presenting the Presidential Medals of Freedom,” The American Presidency Project, August 8, 1994, <https://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/node/217947>.

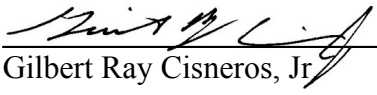
necessary to protect our freedoms and our country.”⁵ The Navy’s decision reflected its tradition of naming ships after American pioneers and visionaries, recognizing Chavez’s legacy as one that continues to inspire.

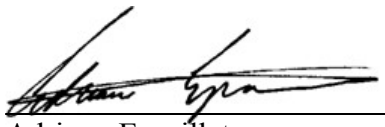
Renaming the USNS Cesar Chavez would also waste federal resources, triggering updates across ship systems, records, and signage— all at the taxpayers’ expense. The American people have witnessed the Department of Defense remove content of minority figures like Jackie Robinson and the Navajo Code Talkers.⁶ These distracting, wasteful, and divisive actions undermine the Department’s mission, particularly in supporting our service members. Please stop any further distracting or wasteful politicizing of our Defense Department processes.

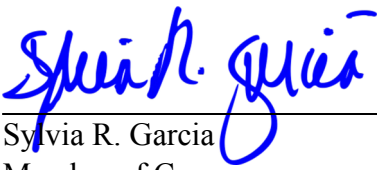
Cesar Chavez's service and life embodied the Navy’s values of honor, courage, and commitment. We urge you to preserve his name on the USNS Cesar Chavez, and to immediately abandon any effort that undermines his treasured legacy.


Sincerely,

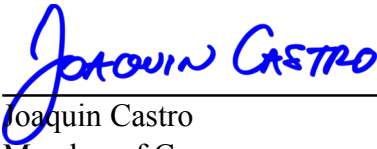

 Sam T. Liccardo
 Member of Congress


 Gilbert Ray Cisneros, Jr.
 Member of Congress


 Adriano Espaillat
 Member of Congress

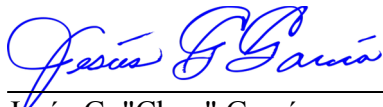

 Sylvia R. Garcia
 Member of Congress


 Robert J. Menendez
 Member of Congress

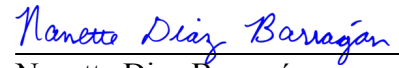

 Joaquin Castro
 Member of Congress

⁵ Janet Jackman, “Navy names ship for Cesar Chavez,” Tucson Sentinel, May 20, 2011, https://www.tucsonsentinel.com/local/report/052011_chavez_ship/navy-names-ship-cesar-chavez/.

⁶ Chris Boccia and Luis Martinez, “DOD says it ‘mistakenly removed’ Jackie Robinson, other content from website amid DEI purge,” ABC News, March 19, 2025, <https://abcnews.go.com/Politics/dod-mistakenly-removed-jackie-robinson-content-website-amid/story?id=119955477>.



Jesús G. "Chuy" García
Member of Congress



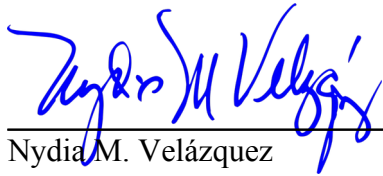
Nanette Diaz Barragán
Member of Congress



Mike Levin
Member of Congress



Maxwell Alejandro Frost
Member of Congress



Nydia M. Velázquez
Member of Congress



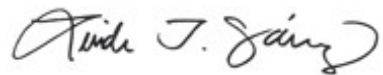
Raul Ruiz, M.D.
Member of Congress



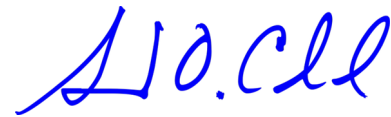
Jim Costa
Member of Congress



Veronica Escobar
Member of Congress



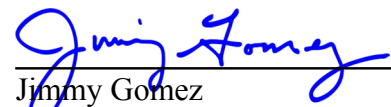
Linda T. Sánchez
Member of Congress



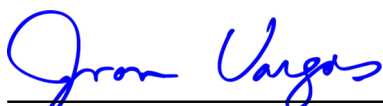
Salud Carbajal
Member of Congress



Robert García
Member of Congress



Jimmy Gomez
Member of Congress



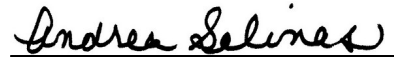
Juan Vargas
Member of Congress



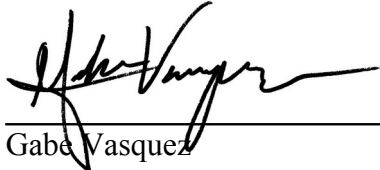
Nellie Pou
Member of Congress

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Luz M. Rivas", written over a horizontal line.

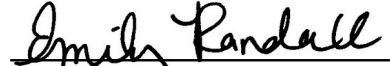
Luz M. Rivas
Member of Congress

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Andrea Salinas", written over a horizontal line.

Andrea Salinas
Member of Congress

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Gabe Vasquez", written over a horizontal line.

Gabe Vasquez
Member of Congress

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Emily Randall", written over a horizontal line.

Emily Randall
Member of Congress