

Congress of the United States
Washington, DC 20515

August 19, 2015

The Honorable Barack Obama
President of the United States
The White House
1600 Pennsylvania Avenue NW
Washington, DC 20500

Dear Mr. President:

We write to bring to your attention an injustice that has been unrecognized in our nation's history. As you said during your speech in South Carolina, for far too long "we have been blind to the way past injustices continue to shape the present." The story of the Port Chicago 50 is one of the many lingering examples of historical racial bias in our society that highlights the continued struggle for equality still present today. As recent events have reminded us of the racial wounds inflicted in our nation's past, seeking justice for these sailors is an opportunity for our country to continue healing and to become a more perfect union. We respectfully request that you publicly recognize and rectify the systematic racial discrimination suffered by these 50 sailors in the aftermath of the Port Chicago Naval Magazine disaster.

This incident was the deadliest home front disaster of World War II. At the time, the armed forces were still segregated. Indicative of the discriminatory practices at the time, all of the enlisted men loading ammunition at the site were African American, while all of the officers were Caucasian. The explosion killed or wounded 710 people, 435 of whom were African American. The Navy continually failed to adequately provide these sailors with the necessary tools to operate under safe working conditions, even after the tragedy struck, because of the color of their skin. When the surviving 258 African-Americans understandably refused to return to work, 50 were charged with mutiny and convicted.

These men courageously defended our country despite the fact that their country did not honor them with the dignity and respect they deserved. Their plea was simply to be treated as equals, with the same care for their lives as those of white officers. Their sentences were eventually commuted, although their mutiny convictions have remained.

Thurgood Marshall, then a Chief Counsel for the NAACP, became a crucial figure during the trial of the 50 sailors. His words are more poignant today than ever before: "what's at stake here is more than the rights of my clients; it's the moral commitment stated in our nation's creed."

Congress has incorporated the Memorial site at Port Chicago into the National Park System. In addition, Congress has compelled the Navy Board for Corrections of Naval Records to review the convictions of the 50 sailors. While the Navy has recognized that "racial prejudice" was a factor in the operations at Port Chicago, it has so far refused to reverse the 1948 court's decision.

It is our understanding that past Presidential action has taken place on behalf of one of the Port Chicago 50. In 1999, President Clinton granted a pardon to Freddie Meeks, one of the surviving sailors convicted of mutiny. We ask for you to do everything in your power to acknowledge the injustice suffered by these sailors and remove these racially-biased convictions from their records.

We look forward to working with you in taking this step toward rightfully honoring these sailors' service and sacrifice to our country. Thank you for your consideration.

Sincerely,


MARK DESAULNIER
Member of Congress


BARBARA LEE
Member of Congress



YVETTE D. CLARKE
Member of Congress


JOHN CONYERS, JR.
Member of Congress


MIKE HONDA
Member of Congress


CEDRIC RICHMOND
Member of Congress


BONNIE WATSON COLEMAN
Member of Congress


DANNY K. DAVIS
Member of Congress