

Commission Examines Assets that Honor the Confederacy, Will Suggest Name Changes



A Pathfinder-class oceanographic survey ship, USNS Maury (T-AGS-66) in 2020. Maury is named after Commander Matthew Fontaine Maury, the “father of modern oceanography.” He served in the U.S. Navy but was also a Confederate naval officer.
U.S. NAVY / LaShawn Sykes

The Department of Defense’s Naming Commission – technically the Commission on the Naming of Items of the Department of Defense that Commemorate the Confederate States of America or Any Person Who Served Voluntarily with the Confederate States of America – has begun its work to examine bases and ships with names tied to the Confederacy and make recommendations for renaming them.

The eight commissioners, chaired by retired Navy Adm. Michelle Howard, were sworn in on March 2 and have begun biweekly meetings. Howard told the press the commission has developed an initial charter to guide the process and is developing renaming procedures and criteria.

The Naming Commission was mandated by Congress under Section 370 of the 2021 National Defense Authorization Act and charged with assigning, modifying or removing anything that commemorates the Confederate States of America or any person who served voluntarily with the Confederacy.

The military services were already contemplating the appropriateness of the eight bases named for Confederate generals who voluntarily fought against the United States – Fort A.P. Hill, Fort Bragg, Fort Lee, Fort Rucker, Fort Benning, Fort Gordon, Fort Hood, Fort Polk and Fort Pickett. A ninth base, Fort Belvoir, was previously named Camp A. A.

Humphreys after Civil War Union Army Gen. Andrew A. Humphreys. It was later named for the plantation that existed at that location, which was operated with enslaved people. The commission will investigate if the renaming of that installation was done to possibly commemorate the Confederacy.

Howard said the commission will be visiting the bases throughout the summer and fall and meeting with local stakeholders to gain perspectives and local opinions in regards to renaming assets.

Congress required a commission be appointed, with four of the commissioners to be appointed by the secretary of defense and four by the chairs and ranking members of the House and Senate Armed Services committees.

In his last days in office, then-Acting Defense Secretary Chris Miller announced his picks, but shortly after taking office Defense Secretary Lloyd Austin III replaced Miller's appointees with his own. In addition to Howard, Austin appointed retired Marine Corps Gen. Bob Neller, Dr. Kori Schake, director of Foreign & Defense Policy Studies at the American Enterprise Institute, and retired Army Brig. Gen. Ty Seidule, emeritus professor of history, U.S. Military Academy.

Beyond the Army bases, there are Navy ships named for Confederate leaders or victories, including the oceanographic ship USNS Maury (T-AGS 66) and guided missile cruiser USS Chancellorsville (CG 62), named for the 1863 battle led by Gen. Robert E. Lee and Gen. Stonewall Jackson. Both those generals were honored by the Navy with the naming of now-decommissioned ballistic missile submarines – USS Robert E. Lee (SSBN 601) and USS Stonewall Jackson (SSBN 634).

Other Navy ships have honored Confederate officers in the past, including guided missile destroyers USS Tattnall (DDG 18), USS Semmes (DDG 18) USS Buchanan (DDG 14) and USS Waddell

(DDG 24); guided missile frigate USS Richard L. Page (FFG 5); and submarine tenders USS Dixon (AS 37) and USS Hunley (AS 31).

Matthew Fontaine Maury, for which USNS Maury is named, is less known for his Confederate service than he was for his work before the Civil War as a student of the environment and its impact on navigation. He published "The Physical Geography of the Sea" in 1855; was superintendent of the United States Naval Observatory; headed the Navy's Depot of Charts and Instruments; and wrote the Wind and Current Chart of the North Atlantic. His method and format of collecting oceanographic observations became a global standard.

According to Howard, the commission's mandate is limited to defense assets with names tied to the Confederacy. That means that bases, ships or facilities honoring officials who owned slaves or were segregationists would not fall under the purview of the commission. USS Carl Vinson, for example, is named for a lawmaker who was a staunch support of the Navy, but also a segregationist. USS Lyndon B. Johnson (DDG 1002) is named for a former president and naval officer who initially supported segregation but later championed the Civil Rights Act of 1964.

In addition to bases, the legislation calls for comprehensive inventory of military assets, such as buildings, street names, parks, ships, aircraft and equipment that in some way commemorate the Confederacy. Grave markers, museums or artifacts within museums are not part of the commission's mandate, but it may examine displays that may glorify the CSA.

The commission will brief the secretary of defense on its progress and recommendations, and is required to brief the House and Senate Armed Services Committees on its progress by Oct. 1. The commission's final report is due Oct. 1, 2022.