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Mr. Barack Obama
President of the United States
The White House
1600 Pennsylvania NW
Washington, D.C. 20500

Dear Mr. President:

I join the growing list of Americans enthusiastically urging you to bestow posthumously the Presidential Medal of Freedom on Fred Ross, Sr. A tireless organizer for causes of freedom and justice, Mr. Ross's long career has shaped the positive direction of American democracy in the twentieth century.

Others who knew Mr. Ross personally will undoubtedly attest to the ways that his dogged work as an organizer, his courage, and his decency shaped their lives directly. As a historian, I have come to know Mr. Ross in a different way--through my research on democratic social movements of the twentieth century. Absorbed in the archival record of his remarkable life for many weeks at a time over the past several years, I have met a man who is at once a towering figure in the history of American democratic activism, yet so humble as to have largely escaped national recognition and a place in the history books.

This relative anonymity is unfortunate and in need of correction, since we find Fred Ross at key moments in U.S. history, standing for justice and freedom and the best potential of American democracy, even when it was a difficult stand to take. During the Great Depression he worked with displaced migrant farmworkers in a Farm Security Administration camp to bring them directly into the governance of the camp. During and after World War II he worked for the War Relocation Board seeking employment and housing for interned Japanese-Americans. He is most well-known for his work with Mexican Americans, helping to establish the Community Service Organization in the 1940s and 50s in California, which taught English, supported immigrants seeking citizenship, and organized for social justice issues in local and statewide campaigns that

ranged from police brutality, enactment and enforcement of labor laws, to community development. After mentoring and working closely with Cesar Chavez and Delores Huerta in the CSO, he then went to work with them in the United Farmworkers Union. For nearly six decades Mr. Ross helped countless Americans push for their political rights and organize for social and economic justice. We owe much to Mr. Ross's tireless efforts for freedom and democracy.

When I share Fred Ross's life story and his tremendous accomplishments with students and young activists today in the Midwest, they come to recognize him as the author of many of the organizing tactics they use. More importantly, they find him an inspiration, particularly when they wonder if their own political and social justice work will ever make a difference. Hearing his story, they are better able to see themselves as part of long tradition of American democratic activism that didn't suddenly rise in the 1950s and 60s with the modern Civil Rights movement or the student movements. They better understand that protecting and expanding freedom and democracy within our nation has required commitment and courage over the long haul. When they learn of the economic and social justice achievements Mr. Ross helped people attain and of his long dedication, they begin to see that their own work can make a difference.

Because he has pushed the United States to always live up to its potential, has helped so many achieve so much, has provided us with organizing tools to continue to pursue and protect freedom and justice, Fred Ross, Sr. embodies the meaning of the Presidential Medal of Freedom. I hope you will honor him and all those who have learned from him and whose lives are better because of him, by bestowing posthumously this well-deserved award.

Sincerely,

Laura M. Westhoff

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