



GARDNER: Mojave Veterans Memorial

May 29, 2009

Many Americans think of Memorial Day as a three-day weekend at the beach, but to those of us who have worn the uniform and to our families, who also have sacrificed, Memorial Day is a day of remembrance.

Remembering is what a group of veterans had in mind in 1934 when they erected a simple memorial in the shape of a cross to honor 53,000 Americans who had died in battle during our nation's 19-month involvement in what was called the "War to End All Wars."

Seventy-five years later, the U.S. Supreme Court will determine whether that gesture of respect violates the U.S. Constitution's separation of church and state. This is because the memorial resides on federal property in the middle of California's Mojave National Preserve.

More is at stake, however, than just the fate of a 7-foot-tall white cross atop Sunrise Rock - currently covered with a plywood box by lower court order. The real issue behind *Salazar v. Buono* is whether the use of religious symbolism in veterans memorials on public property violates the Establishment Clause.

If the High Court rules in favor of the plaintiff, every such memorial across the land will be in jeopardy of being torn down - and the ultimate loser will be America. That's because veterans memorials help our nation remember what came before.

To remember how half of the 56 signers of the Declaration of Independence took up arms to fight the British. How a nation divided in 1861 would emerge bloodied but still united four years later. How the United States would help defeat tyranny in two world wars in the 20th century and then outlast communist oppression during a 45-year Cold War. And how a new generation of warriors has picked up that mantle of responsibility to protect and defend America when others would rather just criticize.

The critics argue that organized religion and its symbols have no place in government even though our country was founded on religious freedom and tolerance.

The irony is that those who often protest the loudest are also the most intolerant. They twist the meaning of the Establishment Clause - which prohibits the government from creating a

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national religion or endorsing one religion over another - to imply the Founding Fathers wanted all things religious separated from all things governmental.

Military veterans know there are a great many things in our country that are worth protecting with our voices or lives if necessary.

Veterans memorials deserve protection because without them, the story that is our nation cannot be told properly. And if that story is not told, the service and sacrifice of more than 1 million Americans who have died in uniform will be forgotten.

The essence of Memorial Day is to remember our fallen from all wars. That is what those World War I veterans meant so long ago in the middle of the desert, and that is what I hope the High Court will consider when it hears the case in the fall, because public land also means "our" land.

Glen Gardner, a Vietnam War veteran from Round Rock, Texas, is the national commander of the 2.2 million-member Veterans of Foreign Wars of the U.S. and its Auxiliaries. For more information on the Mojave Desert Veterans Memorial, go to www.donttearmedown.com.

www.washingtontimes.com/news/2009/may/25/mojave-veterans-memorial