

Preserving the Memory of the Fallen

THAT WE ARE REMEMBERING A SPECIAL CLASS OF CITIZEN ON MEMORIAL DAY GOES WITHOUT SAYING

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Memorial Day needs a public revival. Far too few Americans genuinely appreciate the sacrifices made on their behalf.

“Let no neglect, no ravages of time, testify to the present or to the coming generations that we have forgotten as a people the cost of a free and undivided republic.”

It is only appropriate that on the 150th anniversary of the Civil War’s beginning that we quote the founding words of Decoration Day, long since called Memorial Day. John Logan, then head of the Grand Army of the Republic (GAR), called General Order No. 11 (issued May 5, 1868) the proudest act of his life.

That’s saying a lot considering his military record as a Civil War general. Declaring May 30 a national day of remembrance throughout the North was indeed a monumental moment. However, the divisions caused by the war prevented that day from being universally accepted until WWI.

Today, the problem is an apathetic public. Back then, after the Civil War, most American families had a personal connection to a death in uniform. Now, only a handful does. (The holiday’s commercialization in 1968—when its observation was changed to the last Monday in May—minimized its true meaning, too.)

“Few Americans are touched personally by the ongoing conflicts overseas,” editorialized The

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Washington Times. “The vast majority have no direct contact with the war in any form, much less knowing someone who fell.”

Yet it is precisely in wartime that Memorial Day is most poignant. This is especially so because less than 1% of the population is bearing the burden. A survey taken among military families revealed that 94% felt disconnected from the larger society, feeling that their sacrifices are unappreciated.

Remembering is vital. “Memory is the key to the character not only of a person, but a country,” Kathy Roth-Douquet, a Marine wife and founder of Blue Star Families, wrote in USA Today. “Memory is necessary for both historic and moral understanding.”

That we are remembering a special class of citizen on Memorial Day goes without saying. Since time immemorial, Western societies have canonized warriors who sacrificed their lives. Exactly what makes up the character of those willing to sacrifice their lives in battle?

Ancient Athenian statesman Pericles described them in making a plea to honor the dead who had faced the vast armies of Persia on the plains of Greece.

“...In the face of death they resolved to rely upon themselves alone,” he said. “And when the moment came, they were minded to resist and suffer, rather than to fly and save their lives; they ran away from the word dishonor; but on the battlefield their feet stood fast, and in an instant, at the height of their fortune, they passed away from the scene, not of their fear, but of their glory.”

These words apply equally to the Americans who have died in Afghanistan and Iraq, and to those who preceded them dating back to the Revolutionary War. As our society drifts further away from the realities of war, it is necessary to remind the public of what the tiny minority does for the vast majority. That is what Memorial Day is all about.

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