

MEMORIAL DAY MESSAGE

David McIntire – 5/29/2022

So, here we are in the middle of Memorial Day weekend; in what is largely considered the unofficial start of summer – where warmer weather appears to have finally arrived.

Our service may become a bit somber today because it is a day of tribute – a tribute to whom we call “The Fallen” – military personnel who were casualties in service to all of us. In addition to the message, we will hear personal remembrances of family, friends – heroes of some of our members.

I assure you, we won’t minimize the impact of this beautiful weather but **The FACT** is, Memorial Day is a time to remember and really has nothing to do with the coming of the summer season. More about that after a bit of history.

While the first Memorial Day tribute events were not held in the United States until the late 19th century, honoring those fallen in battle dates back thousands of years. The ancient Greeks and Romans held days of remembrance for loved ones annually, adorning their graves with flowers and holding public feasts and festivals in their honor. In Athens, public funerals for fallen soldiers were held after each battle, with the remains of the dead on-display for public mourning followed by a funeral procession that took them to their internment.

Memorial Day in the United States was borne out of the Civil War and a desire to honor our war dead. It was officially proclaimed on 5 May 1868 by General John Logan, national commander of the *Grand Army of the Republic*, a fraternal organization formed in 1866 composed of veterans from all branches of service. As an organization, the *Grand Army of the Republic* became manifest in

hundreds of local community units called “*Posts.*” Of note, The G.A.R. amassed considerable political power in its heyday and became the first advocacy group in American politics supporting, among other things, voting rights for black veterans, establishing regular veterans' pensions, and helping to make Memorial Day a national holiday.

In 1868, Logan asserted the following in his General Order No. 11: “*The 30th of May, 1868, is designated for the purpose of strewing with flowers, or otherwise decorating the graves of comrades who died in defense of their country during the late rebellion, and whose bodies now lie in almost every city, village and hamlet churchyard in the land.*”.

The date of “*Decoration Day,*” as he called it, was chosen because it WAS NOT the anniversary of any particular battle.

On the first *Decoration Day*, General and later President James Garfield made a speech at Arlington National Cemetery. He concluded his talk with these words:

“The voices of these dead will forever fill the land like holy benedictions. What other spot so fitting for their last resting place as this under the shadow of the Capitol saved by their valor? Here, where the grim edge of battle joined; here, where all the hope and fear and agony of their country centered; here let them rest, asleep on the Nation’s heart, entombed in the Nation’s love.”

To honor the fallen that year, 5,000 participants decorated the graves of the 20,000 Union and Confederate soldiers buried in Arlington National Cemetery.

Again, there’s more to the story - parts not always heard, resulting in faded memories.

Many historians credit freed slaves from the South with the origins of Memorial Day, though it was not called Memorial Day. The story goes that as the Civil War neared its end, thousands of Union soldiers, held by the Confederacy as prisoners of war, were herded into a series of newly constructed camps in Charleston, South Carolina. Conditions at one camp, a former racetrack, were so bad that more than 250 prisoners died from disease or exposure, and were buried in a mass grave behind the track's grandstand.

Three weeks after the Confederate surrender, on May 1, 1865, a procession of more than 1,000 people recently freed from enslavement, accompanied by regiments of what were known then as the U.S. Colored Troops and a handful of white Charlestonians, entered the former racetrack camp to sanctify a new, proper burial site for the Union dead. The group sang hymns, gave readings and distributed flowers around the cemetery, which they dedicated to the "Martyrs of the Race Course."

It wasn't until three years later that General Logan issued his order. So, General Logan gets the credit for Decoration Day which became our Memorial Day.

As with so many holidays, the dominant culture controls the story and the ritual. It is interesting, however, to learn that quite possibly, it was African Americans who first set aside a special time to honor Union soldiers -- soldiers who had died in the POW camp. For them, the cause of freedom was everything and it seemed right and fitting to remember the soldiers who died fighting so that they might live in freedom.

Even before the war ended, women's groups across the South were gathering informally to decorate the graves of Confederate dead. In April 1886, the Ladies Memorial Association of Columbus, Georgia resolved to commemorate

the fallen once a year—a decision that is said to have influenced General Logan to follow suit. However, southern commemorations were rarely held on one standard day.

Americans embraced the notion of “Decoration Day” immediately. That first year, more than 27 states held some sort of ceremony. By 1890, every former state of the Union had adopted Decoration Day as an official holiday. For more than 50 years, the holiday was used to commemorate those killed just in the Civil War. It wasn’t until America’s entry into World War I that the tradition was expanded to include those killed in all wars.

Although the term Memorial Day was used beginning in the 1880s, the holiday was officially known as Decoration Day for more than a century, when it was changed by federal law. In 1968, when the U.S. was deeply embroiled in the Vietnam War, the Uniform Monday Holiday Act was passed and went into effect 4 years later on January 1, 1971. Among other things, it moved Memorial Day from its traditional observance on May 30 (regardless of the day of the week), to a set day—the last Monday in May.

The move was not without controversy. Veterans groups, concerned that more Americans associate the holiday with the first long weekend of the summer and not its intended purpose to honor the nation’s war dead. Some continue to lobby for a return to the May 30 observances.

So now we celebrate Memorial Day each year on the last Monday in May, as a tribute to all our military personnel who die in war. This year, after a two-year hiatus due to the Pandemic, most communities are once again waving flags and marching in parades as bands play John Phillip Sousa marches...and, Hopefully, **We Remember Them.**

There is nothing complicated about remembering to honor the fallen men and women. We pause and gather our thoughts and petitions of gratitude.

And then, for many, it gets complicated. It gets complicated because they see how the solemn ritual of remembering our war dead gets altered to be a glorification of war. It is one thing to be proud of military service. It is quite another thing to equate pride of service with glorification of war.

Some critics say we, as a nation, have lost our way. We are asked to set aside a little time on Memorial Day to remember and honor those who made the ultimate sacrifice. And, we do so gratefully. But there is more required of us. We are required to be citizens; citizens who take very seriously the call to arms that may result in the death of many. We are required to be citizens who hold our elected officials – those who have the authority and responsibility to send our youth into battle – accountable for each and every death. We must hold ourselves and our elected officials to the highest standards and ideals of our nation. Standards of freedom and justice and equality.

Freedom, Justice and Equality. Today Harvard Business would call these “CORE VALUES.”

Are those really the standards that determine our military involvement in the world today? The use of military force is a dreadfully serious decision as is the use of military personnel in armed and violent conflict. I am afraid the reality is that the appeal of money and power is stronger than our ideals of freedom, justice and equality. The greed of the already wealthy to amass even greater fortunes can and does pull our country into armed and violent conflict. I am also afraid it is true that our leaders today put personal wealth and power ahead of the national good. When they do, our people in uniform pay for that selfish greed with their lives. That is not a JUST CAUSE. Not even one life should be sacrificed on the altar of profit and power. Not one! I also hope that today we really do remember those who died in battle defending freedom and justice and equality. But consider this...will we really someday be called upon - on Memorial Day -to remember

those who will die defending profits and corporate or personal power? I certainly hope not!

If you are looking for some small ritual to observe and show respect tomorrow, there are still a couple on the books:

- If you raise an American flag on Memorial Day, it should be hung at half-staff until noon, then raised to the top of the staff.
- Since 2000, when the U.S. Congress passed legislation, all Americans are encouraged to pause on Memorial Day for a National Moment of Remembrance at 3 p.m. local time.

These are what you can do.

Award-winning Columnist Rachel Engel suggests there are 5 things not to do:

1. AVOID WISHING ANY ONE A "HAPPY MEMORIAL DAY" -- This is not Christmas – Memorial Day was not founded in joy with the promise of bringing delight each year. Despite what the day has transitioned into in American culture, it was established to honor and remember the fallen.
2. DON'T THANK CURRENT TROOPS JUST BECAUSE IT'S MEMORIAL DAY. Veterans are honored during November on Veteran's Day when we remember and appreciate the sacrifices of all veterans. But, Memorial Day allows the country to focus on those service members who are no longer with us – an important distinction.
3. DON'T DISREGARD ITS IMPORTANCE -- When we focus mostly on the backyard barbecues or discounts on refrigerators, we allow the true meaning of Memorial Day to become lost. Grill some amazing steaks, and find the perfect mattress on sale, just don't forget to raise a glass in honor of those service men and women who gave the ultimate sacrifice.

4. DON'T FORGET IT EXISTS -- Even worse than allowing the day to become synonymous with deep discounts and potato salad, is letting it slip from the public's mind completely. When it becomes simply a highly-anticipated extra morning of sleeping in, instead of the day of reflection and appreciation it was meant to be, we disrespect.

5. DON'T LET POLITICS KEEP YOU FROM RENDERING RESPECT-- Even if you don't agree with the idea of war, or the reasons America goes to war, or the policies of a particular president who was the Commander in Chief during a specific war, it doesn't matter. People have defended the people and interests of America for over 200 years, and your right to disagree with the reasons for war should be separate from opinions of the troops themselves.

What we hope to do here now and tomorrow in a very small way is to remember. We will take some time to honor service men and women with personal connections to members of our congregation in recognition of their sacrifice and to keep their sacrifice alive. I will begin...

LYNN CARL RENNER

The United States Army knew him as Specialist 4th Class Lynn Carl Renner. I knew him as "Bud." As kids, we spent every summer day together at the lake where I grew up. Our days were spent either on, in, or near the water – fishing, swimming, getting into mischief, ruminating over the bevy of totally unattainable beach beauties. We didn't care. Life was carefree and oh, so simple.

The LAST time I saw Bud was in 1965, He was in a funeral home, wearing Army green, lying in in a coffin capped with a looking glass and draped with an American Flag. He stopped growing older on December 26, 1965 as a result of a

non-hostile homicide near the Ah Shau Valley in the Republic of South VietNam – serving in the unit portrayed in the book “We Were Soldiers” He was 22.

I believe Bud was a good soldier. I know he was a good, loyal friend. I honor his memory frequently, especially when I visit Panel 4E – Line 38 on The Wall in Washington, DC. Bud, to me, your name is always warmer on my heart than on a cold, black granite wall.

Carolyn Holmes

Eli Fox

Nancy Johnson

To conclude, let us remember our dead by honoring the living. Let us lift up the ideals and dreams that energize our nation and make us the patriotic citizens we are. It’s not too late. It is not a lost cause. It is our responsibility. For all those who have died in service to our country, may we reward their sacrifice by refusing to require that same ultimate sacrifice from our children and their children.