

What We Owe
Memorial Day 2019

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What today we know as Memorial Day was once Decoration Day, first widely observed over 150 years ago on May 30, 1868. This day traces its roots to an order sent by Major General John A. Logan -- the leader of a Union veteran's organization and Congressman. In his letter, Logan made a case and set the precedent for a holiday in memory of soldiers who died to preserve the Union and break the chains of slavery. He challenged his fellow Americans to "Let no vandalism of avarice or 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." A cost many willingly and bravely paid in the rocky fields of Gettysburg, the rain-sodden roads at Shiloh, along the banks of the Antietam, and in countless fields, villages, roads and hilltops in service to the Union and in the cause of freedom.

Although Decoration Day is the official origin of our modern Memorial Day, it is not its sole inspiration. There are many spiritual, if not official, successors that have inspired how we honor those who gave their lives in defense of our nation. One of the most unique and poignant of these early celebrations took place in the once Confederate stronghold of Charleston, South Carolina. Following the Confederate evacuation of the city, black workmen went to the city's Washington Race Course -- the site of a brutal outdoor prison for captured Union soldiers and a mass grave for the unlucky who would never leave its confines. Here, the men would rebury the Union dead in proper graves and construct a high whitewashed fence with an archway on which was inscribed "Martyrs of the Race Course." The racetrack would host nearly 10,000 freed people, missionaries, teachers and students who came together "in a ritual of remembrance and consecration" to honor those who gave their lives to the cause of true liberty and to celebrate "the triumph of their emancipation." It is always meaningful to memorialize those who sacrifice in the name of our nation; but to use your first acts of freedom to honor the fallen is astonishingly selfless, deeply patriotic and exceedingly inspiring.

After World War One, Memorial Day took on even greater meaning, becoming a day when we honor all of America's war dead. We lay wreaths, adorn the graves of our veterans with flags, assemble parades, eat a hot dog...or two, and spend precious time with our family. It is a day when we honor those who fought and died to preserve our nation, a nation not of a particular people, but of an idea. An idea that "all Men [all people] are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty, and the Pursuit of Happiness....". If ever there was an idea worth dying for it is this. And, equality, freedom, and opportunity are its gifts - given to us by our founders, expanded upon by those they inspired voting in the halls of power or filling the streets with signs in hand, and preserved -- indelibly preserved -- by the brave individuals we honor today.

Of course, one day is simply not enough to honor these men and women, so it is on this day of remembrance and respect, we must all ask: What Do We Owe These Brave Few? How do we repay their eternal debt?

We owe them this day of course, but we must honor them each and every day by using the gifts they have given us to create a better world, stronger nation, kinder community. We can exercise our

freedoms with great care for one another and for the future of our children. We can responsibly take advantage of the many opportunities this land gives us. We can use our talents, the benefits of our fortune, and the love in our hearts to enrich the lives of those around us. We can, and must, as Americans have for over two centuries, aspire to be more, better, kinder tomorrow than we are today.

Using these gifts, secured by the greatest sacrifice, to not only do good but to be good is the closest we may come to repaying their invaluable and eternal gift. We owe them more than can ever be repaid ... but we must try.

Let us seek to honorably relieve them of their duty and follow Major General Logan's words and "gather around their sacred remains, and garland the passionless mounds above them with choicest flowers of springtime...raise above them the dear old flag they saved from dishonor...renew our pledges to aid and assist those whom they have left among us, as sacred charges upon the nation's gratitude..."

But tomorrow and all the days that follow, let us keep their sacrifice in our hearts as we strive to honor them by being good and true, hopeful and strong, and by committing to building a brighter future. Let us do as the people of Charleston did all those years ago, and use our precious freedom – that delicate freedom – through our words and deeds, to honor those who accepted death for the love of their country and its best ideals.

May God hold them and their families in the palm of His hand. May His grace shower all of us. And, may he continue to bless the United States of America – and all those in service to her.