

Remembering the Dead in Unity and Peace

Soldiers' graves are the greatest preachers of peace.
Albert Schweitzer¹



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From the window of my room in the house where I grew up, I could see the American flag flying over Fort Sam Houston National Cemetery. I would ride my bicycle around the paths that divided the grassy sections of graves to the blocks where my father and grandfather were buried. I would stand before the gravesites in a state combining prayer, processing, and remembrance. Carved into my grandfather's headstone were the 2 world wars he fought in and on my father's, the 3 conflicts in which he served. I would walk up to their headstones and trace the emblems of belief: the engraved Star of David that marked my grandfather's grave and the simple cross for my father.

My visits and writing about them may strike some readers as morbid. However, for me, the experience and memories are calming and peaceful, like the cemetery. There was something incredibly comforting about the uniformity of the headstones standing out for miles, mirroring the ranks of soldiers in the wars they commemorated. Yet, as with the men and women who fought each conflict, every grave told a succinct Hemingway-like story of their military career etched in stone. I know now that discrimination in the military segregated even the burial of service members.² It appeared to my younger self that at least compared to civilian cemeteries with their massive monuments to the wealthy and powerful, there was an egalitarian effect: my master sergeant grandfather's plot was indistinguishable from that of my colonel father.

Memorial Day and military cemeteries have a shared history. While Veterans Day honors all who have worn the uniform, living and dead, Memorial Day, as its name suggests, remembers those who have died in a broadly conceived line of duty. To emphasize the more solemn character of the holiday, the original name, Decoration Day, was changed to emphasize the reverence of remembrance.³ The first widespread observance of Memorial Day was to commemorate those who perished in the Civil War, which

remains the conflict with the highest number of casualties in American history. The first national commemoration occurred at Arlington National Cemetery when 5000 volunteers decorated 20,000 Union and Confederate graves in an act of solidarity and reconciliation. The practice struck a chord in a country beleaguered by war and division.²

National cemeteries also emerged from the grief and gratitude that marked the Civil War. President Abraham Lincoln, who gave us the famous US Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) mission motto, also inaugurated national cemeteries. At the beginning of the Civil War, only Union soldiers who sacrificed their lives to end slavery were entitled to burial. Reflective of the rift that divided the country, Confederate soldiers contended that such divisiveness should not continue unto death and were granted the right to be buried beside those they fought against, united in death and memory.⁴

Today, the country is more divided than ever: more than a few observers of American culture, including the new popular film *Civil War*, believe we are on the brink of another civil war.⁵ While we take their warning seriously, there are still signs of unity amongst the people, like those who followed the war between the states. Recently, in that same national cemetery where I first contemplated these themes, justice, delayed too long, was not entirely denied. A ceremony was held to dedicate 17 headstones to honor the memories of Black World War I Army soldiers who were court-martialed and hanged in the wake of the Houston riots of 1917. As a sign of their dishonor, their headstones listed only their dates and names—nothing of their military service. At the urging of their descendants, the US Army reopened the files and found the verdict to have been racially motivated. They set aside their convictions, gave them honorable discharges for their service in life, and replaced their gravesites with ones that enshrined that respect in death.⁶

Some reading this column may, like me, have

had the profound privilege of participating in a burial at a national cemetery. We recall the stirring mix of pride and loss when the honor guard hands the perfectly folded flag to the bereaved family member and bids farewell to their comrade with a salute. Yet, not all families have this privilege. One of the saddest experiences I recall is when I was in a leadership position at a VA facility and unable to help impoverished families who were denied VA burial benefits or payments to transport their deceased veteran closer to home. That sorrow often turned to thankful relief when a veterans service organization or other community group offered to pay the funerary expenses. Fortunately, like eligibility for VA health care, the criteria for burial benefits have steadily expanded to encompass spouses, adult children, and others who served.⁷

In a similar display of altruism this Memorial Day, veterans service organizations, Boy Scouts, and volunteers will place a flag on every grave to show that some memories are stronger than death. If you have never seen it, I encourage you to visit a VA or a national cemetery this holiday or, even better, volunteer to place flags. Either way, spend a few moments thankfully remembering that we can all engage in those uniquely American Memorial Day pastimes of barbecues and baseball games because so many served and died to protect our way of life. The epigraph at the beginning of this column is attributed to Albert Schweitzer, the

physician-theologian of reverence for life. The news today is full of war and rumors of war.⁸ Let us all hope that the message is heard around the world so there is no need to build more national cemeteries to remember our veterans.

Disclaimer

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