

Gilligan: Memorial Day, 2017

By John F. Gilligan

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Twenty-one bootsteps are heard. Parents and children watch in dead silence, which is mandatory. For this is sacred ground. The sentinel halts, makes a left face and stands at attention for 21 seconds before the Tomb of the Unknown Soldier. Inscribed upon it:

HERE RESTS IN HONORED GLORY AN AMERICAN SOLDIER KNOWN BUT TO GOD

The sentinel then makes a left face, shifts the rifle to the left shoulder and retraces the steps. It's a patterned ritual of precise 21-second acts. They symbolize the highest honor granted by the United States of America: a 21-gun salute.

The Tomb has been guarded despite the weather each second of the hour 24/7 since 1937. Memorial Day is every day at Arlington National Cemetery.

Unless there are citizens willing to die for America, the "blessings of liberty to ourselves and our posterity" will not last. Nor will the other purposes of the United States Constitution be achieved as set forth in its Preamble: "to form a more perfect union, establish justice, insure domestic tranquility, provide for the common defense [and] promote the general welfare."

Experience teaches that the threats to forging a more perfect union are endless. And the price of that work is costly. We, the people, have established Memorial Day to recognize and honor those who risked and paid the highest price that this nation might live.

It's the only sacred day Americans have in common. In this secular culture, some may find the adjective "sacred" disturbing. Yet if nothing is sacred, then raw self-interest will rule with ruinous consequences.

"God, Country, and Family" is a simple yet profound set of interdependent, transcendent truths and a life-ordering force for national life. It implies duty, restraint, service for the common good and that there are things worth dying for.

Abraham Lincoln said it best. With hundreds of thousands of lives sacrificed on the battlefields, Lincoln wrestled with the meaning of these deaths. His Gettysburg Address was the answer. It's our answer today.

He first reminded the audience that “our fathers brought forth on this continent a new nation, conceived in liberty, and dedicated to the proposition that all men are created equal.” And the Civil War was a test “as to whether this nation or any nation so conceived and so dedicated can long endure.”

Lincoln raised our understanding of the American vision to a new level. The Gettysburg Address has been labeled the Second Founding.

Yet the American track record has been muddy. Some would argue the land of the free is pure hypocrisy. But hypocrisy is a propensity of human nature and pervades every nation and society.

Lincoln was hardly naïve. He knew of the lesser angels of our nature: greed, deceit, hate, exploitation. Yet he believed the founding vision could move a diverse and varied nation beyond those human propensities to make a better America. That’s a vision, which is not something we have in hand but what we ceaselessly strive for.

No nation in the history of humanity has ever been so conceived. Whether it can endure or not is a daily test. It is “unfinished work,” said Lincoln, “and it is for us the living ... to be dedicated to the great task remaining before us.”

We draw inspiration and courage from those who have advanced our nation. The America we enjoy did not materialize out of thin air but was handed down by those who have gone before. They deserve a few moments of our gratitude. Memorial Day is when we renew our “resolve that these dead shall not have died in vain.”

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