

Gilligan: On Memorial Day, 2018, remembering the past, envisioning and acting on the future

By John F. Gilligan

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A stimulus-response lifestyle is dehumanizing. Yet the gravitational forces of a technologically driven world-order can do that. They have the g-force of a black hole. Is there no escape?

If a nation is to endure, it requires a set of beliefs — traditions and rituals — to nourish its spirit. The Fourth of July and Memorial Day serve as the alpha and omega of American traditions that keep us alive. They remind us of who we are as a people.

But too often we find ourselves swept up in a swirling vortex of unreflected actions. That may have great survival value for grasshoppers, squirrels and chimpanzees, but it's deadly for humans. "What is man," asked Hamlet, "if his chief good and market of his time be to sleep and feed? A beast, no more." A failure to think before action is perhaps one reason why political life in America seems so beastly.

If Memorial Day is anything, it's a day of remembering those who have gone before us. In so doing, questions emerge about ourselves: Who am I, where am I going, and how do I get there? But that's not all. Since we are interdependent social beings who either flourish or perish within a nation, it's also imperative to know who we are as a people.

These are humanity's age-old haunting questions that get stirred every Memorial Day. Death of loved ones and those who sacrificed their lives and bodies for the sake of the nation force us to face a stark reality: our own demise. What, then, ought we to do between now and then?

Here's the Memorial Day answer. It's rooted in Western civilization's first democracy, 2,400 years ago, when Pericles gave his Funeral Oration. He explained why the Athenians were dying on the battle field.

Abraham Lincoln's Gettysburg Address was similar in purpose. Whether Lincoln modeled his funeral oration after Pericles' is unknown. But both embodied the same themes and structure. They were funeral orations honoring the dead and asserting a truth: There are life matters worth dying for.

The democracies of Pericles and Lincoln were facing annihilation. Given the stark reality of the world, democracy is always under assault. Personal freedom, safety, peace and prosperity can never be attained or maintained without a willingness to die for them. Otherwise, the people inevitably become the puppets of those who enslave directly through coercion or indirectly through propaganda.

A healthy democracy has a laser focus on the common good. Its Achilles' heel is discord, which is what severed the Athenian bonds of union. And it took 1,500 years before Greece got it back.

Would discord also destroy America? Lincoln called upon his fellow citizens to remember the nation's founding belief: "All men are created equal." For if you deny the reality of that belief to one person, everyone is vulnerable to the same fate.

Before ours, no nation in the world had ever been founded on such a principle. Yet this was not a vision of what America was but of what it could and ought to be. It remains the American Pole Star. And Lincoln wondered: "Could any nation so conceived and so dedicated long endure?" The answer is in our hands as it was for Americans in 1863 and Athenians in 431 BC.

If an abstract vision is to have any substance, it must be played out in concrete action. In Athens, Pericles said, "we all live exactly as we please ... and we don't get angry at our neighbor for doing what he likes ... every citizen is subject to the same laws." And the lifeblood of the American Republic — the pursuit of the common good, argued Lincoln, depends upon "a government of the people, by the people, and for the people."

Freedom, peace and prosperity are not guaranteed to anyone. What we have today has been hard won by our ancestors. And it remains for us the living to safeguard and propagate that inheritance if this nation is to endure.

The first step on Memorial Day is to reflect upon what has been given us. The second is gratitude. And the third step is ongoing action for the common good.

This is part and parcel of the American vision and what it means to be a citizen of the United States of America. For as Proverbs 29:18 states: "Where there is no vision, the people perish."

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