

Op-Ed: Memorial Day embodies America's sacred convictions

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A sacred day that embodies sacred convictions is Memorial Day. I owe the conciseness of that definition to Oliver Wendell Holmes.

Holmes is more known for his 30-year service as a U.S. Supreme Court justice, but he was also a first lieutenant in the 20th Massachusetts Regiment of Volunteers who was seriously wounded during the Civil War battles at Ball's Bluff, Antietam and Chancellorsville. In a Memorial Day speech, Holmes defined it not just as a sacred day but the most sacred day of the year, for it honored those who were willing to die and had died for sacred convictions in order that, to quote Lincoln, "This nation might live."

Sacred refers to a line not to be crossed. It's deemed inviolable whether it be a place, space, object, person or belief. But who now speaks of sacred days and sacred convictions? That's a language rapidly vanishing from what was once part of our common cultural heritage. This can hardly be good for the nation.

Parts of western civilization have thoroughly deconstructed the sacred, emptied it of any reality or truth. Truth only exists to the extent it's expedient and convenient, and ceases when it is not. In the end, there's nothing worth dying for.

And it appears that America is merrily dancing down that yellow brick road. As for the Wizard of Oz, the curtains have been pulled back and the sacred seen as nothing more than a power play for institutional oppression by political, religious and corporate leaders. Yet, from the dawning of our nation, we have held the sacred truth "that all men are created equal, endowed by their Creator with certain inalienable rights ... life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness." And those sacred rights were secured by a secular government "instituted among men, deriving their just powers from the consent of the governed." The golden coin of the American republic has always had these two sides: sacred and secular.

Walking across the widespread fields of the dead at Verdun, Normandy, Anzio, Gettysburg and Arlington, the reality that men and women gave their lives to preserve our sacred rights for this country seizes one's very being. There's nothing relative here.

One is standing on sacred ground. Because of those who lie beneath our feet, we are still free to think and speak whatever we wish and live as we please. And the price of that was their willingness to die for the nation.

To paraphrase Thomas Jefferson's question, we too must ask: Can the liberties of America be thought secure when we have removed the conviction that they are sacred? The answer is self-evident: Without them, we perish.

In visiting the grave sites of those who have gone before us, recall that they followed in the footsteps of the Founding Fathers and their fellow Americans who pledged their "lives, fortunes, and sacred honor" to give and preserve our liberties. And it is in remembering their sacrifices that we not only honor them, but also draw inspiration and courage to do likewise.

Memorial Day: It's that sacred day that embodies sacred convictions.

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