

## Gilligan: Memorial Day a reminder that American quest is never-ending process

By John F. Gilligan

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No one is born a ready-made adult. And that's true for a nation. Both require years of development. The Civil War marked a period of national identity confusion — it was not the first nor would it be the last. Country loyalty for many was to their states and counties. Robert E. Lee made his decision to serve the Confederacy on that principle.

A hundred years later, scientists developed a model for the stages of social development and group identity: Forming, Storming, Norming, and Performing. But they forgot about Deforming. For there's a natural propensity of every system, physical or sociopolitical, to degenerate.

What stage the United States is in today is arguable. But Storming definitely defined the Civil War period, 1861-65. Americans killed one another over differing meanings of freedom and equality. More perished then than the sum of all other American wars. Grieving, resentments, conflicts and ill will between northern and southern states persisted well into the 1960s.

The Civil War raises fundamental Storming questions: Who were we as Americans? (And do we even know now?) Lincoln asked the same question in a different way in his 1863 Gettysburg Address. What did these men die for?

Memorial Day, which began shortly after that war, embodies his answer. "Our fathers brought forth on this continent a new nation, conceived in liberty, and dedicated to the proposition that all men are created equal."

This was America's conception and vision begun in 1776. No one has stated it more precisely and concisely than Abraham Lincoln. And no other nation in history has ever proclaimed anything like it.

That's the American quest, but what would it take to get there? Less we forget, there was no United States of America during the Revolutionary War. There were only 13 Colonies declaring themselves "Free and Independent States." And the only way to achieve freedom said Benjamin Franklin was "to hang together or, most assuredly, we shall all hang separately."

American history has amply verified that freedom and a common identity as a people have been a hard row to hoe. Twelve years after the adoption of the United States Constitution in 1787 Storming emerged again. Many feared that the New England states might break away. And it took 36 ballots in 1801 for the House of Representatives to select Thomas Jefferson as president.

The Missouri Compromise of 1820 concealed a major and growing fissure among the states that foretold a Deforming. Fourscore and seven years after the 1776 Forming, an American identity crisis was in full bloom. The Civil War, asserted Lincoln, was a great test as to whether America “or any nation so conceived and so dedicated” could long endure.

Many still wonder about this. Is it possible to be a land in which fellow citizens can live and let others live freely? The Civil War never settled it. Nor could it. For the American quest is a never ending process.

“It is for us, the living,” said Lincoln, “to be dedicated to the unfinished work and the great task remaining before us.” Forging a unified nation around the concepts of freedom and equality out of a multiplicity of diverse and antagonistic cultures requires work and discipline. Without effort, good will and the harnessing of passions among citizens, especially by their elected representatives, leads inevitably to breakdown, disorder and violence.

Gettysburg became the first Memorial Day cemetery. Lincoln reminded his audience that it was “a final resting place for those who here gave their lives that this nation might live.” It’s why many historians consider the Civil War the nation’s second founding.

Over the decades men and women on other battlefields have given their lives “that the nation may live.” It is from them that we are inspired to achieve our national vision— “a nation conceived in liberty and dedicated to the proposition that all men are created equal.”

This is the heart of Memorial Day. It reminds us of our heritage, common identity, and what it means to be an American. But it takes work to counter the natural breakdown forces in life. Nothing great has ever been achieved without effort.

And it all began with the American vision that transcends self-interests for a greater common good. By engaging in a common project to build a better nation, we become better human beings and Americans. “Where there is no vision,” says Proverbs 29:18, “the people perish.” But if the people don’t pursue it, they also perish.

Today, the first step is to stop demonizing and making a them out of fellow citizens. It eviscerates all meaning of what it is to be an American. And it's the quickest path to national self-destruction.

Let not those who gave their lives to preserve America be in vain.

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