

□ *"I have never been able to think of the day as one of mourning; I have never quite been able to feel that half-masted flags were appropriate on Decoration Day. □ I have rather felt that the flag should be at the peak, because those whose dying we commemorate rejoiced in seeing it where their valor placed it. □ We honor them in a joyous, thankful, triumphant commemoration of what they did."*

□ - *Benjamin Harrison, 23rd President of the United States (1889-1893)*

As we honor America's fallen this Memorial Day, it is indeed a time of mixed emotions - sadness and loss, but also pride and gratitude. That a person would lay down his or her life for another is one of the noblest of human ideals. Since our country's birth, countless lives have been given to defend the liberties we enjoy today. And once again on Monday, May 31, we pause to celebrate these brave men and women.

The practice of what we now celebrate as "Memorial Day" began in the years immediately following the Civil War. In 1868, the head of an organization of Union veterans established "Decoration Day" as a time for the nation to decorate the graves of the Civil War dead with flowers. The day selected was May 30, a time in late Spring when flowers would be in bloom across the nation.

"Decoration Day" gradually grew in popularity and practice. By the early 1900s, ceremonies were being held on May 30 throughout the nation and families were routinely visiting cemeteries to decorate the graves of Civil War soldiers. On one noted occasion, women living near Columbus, Mississippi, were so disturbed by the sight of the neglected graves of Union soldiers that they took care to see these graves were properly decorated as well.

After World War I, the day was expanded to honor those who have died in all American wars. "Decoration Day" soon became better known as "Memorial Day." In 1971, "Memorial Day" was declared a national holiday by an act of Congress and placed on the last Monday in May.

Today, we continue the solemn tradition of Memorial Day and reflect upon its profound meaning. We honor the extraordinary sacrifice so many have made on our behalf. Their bravery has afforded us the liberty and security we enjoy today.

By participating in ceremonies this Memorial Day, you and your family keep alive a long tradition of ceremonial recognition for loved ones and heroes. Communal remembrance of those who have gone before us is a longstanding human tradition. And when we focus our remembrance on the war veterans who sacrificed for us, the act is particularly meaningful and appropriate. Ever since there has been fighting and dying in war, there has been a calling in the human heart to memorialize the fallen heroes of battle.

American troops have been and continue to be steadfast, selfless, and undeterred in their service. Our most recent military operations in Iraq and Afghanistan demonstrate this fact very clearly. We continue to suffer from the loss of life in war. It is our duty as Americans to honor the memories of our fallen soldiers with the highest esteem and keep their stories alive for

Memorial Day: An Honorable Tradition

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generations to come.

It is important that we take time on this important day to remember those men and women who have made the ultimate sacrifice in the service of our country, and honor and support those who continue to put themselves in harm's way on behalf of the well-being of America.