

# **Republican Perspective**

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## **A Story of Reconciliation**

“The Confederate Gift to the Nation” by Wesley Pruden came to me as a surprise. Pruden is editor in chief emeritus of the Washington Times. There are other versions which differ in some of the details, but they don’t contradict the essence of Pruden’s account or, more importantly, its message.

It came as a surprise because only avid students of the Civil War and its aftermath would be aware of the circumstances Pruden describes. It is a story of post-war reconciliation which has sadly not been exhibited by modern-day revisionists who think they know better than those who lived through that time. Or, more likely, in their zeal to right wrongs, they never bothered to consider the views of the long-ago combatants or their surviving loved ones.

A year after the end of the War, according to Pruden, some ladies in Columbus, Georgia, “with broken hearts” visited the local graveyard to place flags and flowers on the graves of their fathers, sons, husbands, and brothers who had been killed “defending hearth and home from the depredations of William Tecumseh Sherman.” Sherman’s swath of destruction was so complete that he is said to have declared “if a crow flies across Georgia it will have to carry its own provisions.”

Forgiving their former enemies, the Southern ladies also decorated the graves of the few Union soldiers buried in their cemetery. This incident was noted by Northern newspapers. For example: “The act was as beautiful as it was unselfish, and it will be appreciated in the North.” And “Let this incident, touching and beautiful as it is, impart to our Washington authorities a lesson in conciliation.”

The scene was replicated annually in other towns throughout the South. In 1868, General John A. Logan, commander of the Grand Army of the

Republic, an association of Union veterans, said “It is not too late for the Union men of the nation to follow the example of the people of the South.” And so the observance known as Decoration Day was proclaimed, was celebrated in both the North and the South and, in time, became our national Memorial Day.

Pruden goes on to say that “The Union adoption of a Confederate holiday was particularly poignant...so soon after Appomattox. Men who had fought to the death for four miserable years put aside bitter remembrance to embrace each other as friends. Grant became friends with Lee, and Joe Johnston...whose army had fought Sherman’s at Atlanta, stood for an hour in a cold rain to pay honor...” at Sherman’s funeral cortege. “Such men would not have understood the current fashion of contempt for old foes...” Think about the reconciliation Pruden describes. Consider the strength of character displayed by the gracious ladies of Columbus and by those who were moved to follow their example. They had suffered the ravages of the War and were able, in the end, to embrace their similarly scarred fellow Americans.

That conciliatory mindset and strength of character would serve us well today.