

Republican Perspective

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SUMMER BEGINS

"When you open your heart to patriotism, there is no room for prejudice." Donald Trump, 45th President of US

The nation celebrated Memorial Day this past Monday. To many Americans it is the start of the summer season. But that was not the intent of Memorial Day. In this time of "revisionist" history, let's take a look at the origins of Memorial Day before it is re-written.

The Civil War took a brutal toll on a young nation. The Union Army lost 363,020 soldiers. The Confederate Army lost 199,110. In perspective, the 1860 US census tallied 31.4 million souls, a population less than current California. Census questions included: 1) "Enumerator could list the state, territory, or country of the person's birth; 2) Was the person deaf and dumb, blind, idiotic, pauper, or convict?" Dare we ask these today?

This loss of blood and treasure led the head of an organization of Union veterans, the Grand Army of the Republic (GAR), to establish Decoration Day as a time for the nation to decorate the graves of the war dead with flowers. Maj. Gen. John A. Logan declared that Decoration Day

should be observed on May 30. "The 30th of May, 1868, is designated for the purpose of strewing with flowers, or otherwise decorating the graves of comrades who died in defense of their country during the late rebellion, and whose bodies now lie in almost every city, village and hamlet churchyard in the land," he proclaimed.

There are differing views why May 30 was chosen. Some believe it was chosen because flowers would be in bloom all over the country. Others that May 30 is not an anniversary of any Civil War battles. Still another explanation goes back to a French emigrant woman named Cassandra Oliver Moncure, who in 1866 organized a Decoration event in Virginia and picked May 30. She explained that May 30 is the "Day of Ashes" when Napoleon's ashes were returned to France from St. Helena.

The first Decoration Day was held at Arlington Cemetery, across the Potomac from Washington DC. General James Garfield made a speech and 5,000 participants decorated the graves of the 20,000 Union and Confederate soldiers buried there. However, the practice of memorializing Civil War dead, and decorating their graves goes back earlier. The earliest recorded event took place on April 25, 1866, in Columbus, Mississippi when a group of women formed an association to decorate the graves of civil war soldiers, starting with those who died in the Battle of Shiloh.

Some two dozen cities claimed to be the birthplace of Decoration Day. The towns of Macon, GA, Columbus, GA, and Richmond, VA placed their claim, having first celebrated it in 1866. The town of Boalsburg, PA claims to have celebrated the first Decoration Day in 1868. Carbondale, IL claims to have celebrated it first on April 29, 1866. Add Charleston, SC to the list. The first state to recognize it was New York in 1873.

After World War I, Decoration Day was extended to include all men and women who died in any war or military action. To resolve the origin history, Congress unanimously passed House Concurrent Resolution 587 in 1966. This reads in part: "Resolved that the Congress of the United States, in recognition of the patriotic tradition set in motion one hundred years ago in the Village of Waterloo, NY, does hereby officially recognize Waterloo, New York as the birthplace of Memorial Day..." President Lyndon Johnson signed the legislation in 1967.

Decoration Day became Memorial Day as a federal holiday in 1971. It happened with the passing by Congress of the Uniform Holidays Bill. Since then, we celebrate every last Monday of May instead of May 30. Several southern states have an additional separate day for honoring the Confederate war dead: January 19 in Texas; April 26 in Alabama, Florida, Georgia, and Mississippi; May 10 in South Carolina; and June 3 (Jefferson Davis' birthday) in Louisiana and Tennessee.

To help re-educate and remind Americans of the true meaning of Memorial Day, the "National Moment of Remembrance" resolution passed Congress in December 2000. It asks that at 3 p.m. local time all Americans "voluntarily and informally observe in their own way a Moment of Remembrance and respect, pausing from whatever they are doing for a moment of silence or listening to Taps."

Veteran groups argue for restoring Memorial Day to May 30. According to the Veterans of Foreign Wars (VFW), "Changing the date merely to create three-day weekends has undermined the very meaning of the day. No doubt, this has contributed greatly to the general public's nonchalant observance of Memorial Day."