

Memorial Day 2007

Decoration Day, or Memorial Day, as we now know it, grew out of a simple act of patriotism, love, and respect. A group of southern women, struggling to survive in the aftermath of the Civil War, visited a cemetery in Columbus, Mississippi, where they put bitterness and divisiveness aside and placed flowers on the graves of both Union and Confederate soldiers. These women had suffered grievously, yet wanted to honor the fallen from the north and south, to help bind the deep wounds that divided our country, and to help heal our nation.

Today is a national day of remembrance. We honor the heroes who laid down their lives to preserve this great nation. Today, we honor those who have carried the torch of freedom to the farthest corners of the world, those generations of Americans who selflessly answered their nation's call to defend against tyranny and repression.

Unlike the Civil War and the First and Second World Wars, most Americans experience the war with Iraq only in the abstract. We see the war news nightly on television or we read about it in the paper, but in real terms, unless you have a loved one in the service, it barely touches most of our lives. Unlike other wars and other times, there is no rationing of food, gasoline, or other necessities. As an everyday matter, there is little "shared sacrifice" with soldiers who are fighting overseas or even with their families left behind.

The Civil War was different of course. The civilian population could not escape it easily. Like the Revolutionary War, the Civil War was fought in peoples' backyards. History reminds us that the Civil War was one of the most cataclysmic events in American history. Six hundred and twenty thousand (620,000) soldiers died, the highest death toll by far of any war in which our nation has fought. A generation of young men perished in a struggle that no longer makes any sense to us. Brother fought brother over an abomination called "slavery."

World Wars I and II, Korea, and Vietnam saw different types of sacrifices and devastation than did the Civil War and for our returning G.I.'s, challenges that were different from those of earlier freedom fighters. Unlike the Civil War veterans who returned to private life by walking back into their family farms and beating their swords into plowshares, our G.I.'s returned home from overseas needing housing, jobs, and an education.

After World War II, our congress and President Truman responded courageously with the G.I. Bill, legislation that raised an entire generation out of poverty and created the middle class.

Sadly, our treatment of our Vietnam vets remains a dark chapter in our history. Too many of them returned home physically but never made it back in other ways, and, as a nation, we failed them. Yesterday's *Sunday Republican* newspaper honored fallen Vietnam veterans, including many from the 1st Hampden and Hampshire District. Today,

we honor their memories and remember the sacrifices of their families. It is important that we reflect not only upon the sacrifices of all those servicemen and women whom we today memorialize, but we must also contemplate what the concepts of “commitment” and “shared sacrifice” will require of us, the protected and free, as the war on terror goes on. Make no mistake, the needs of our returning servicemen and women will be great.

Here are some statistics. As of May 20th, approximately 3,769 service men and women have died nationwide in the war on terrorism. Massachusetts has lost 92 of its citizens. These numbers are deceptively small in terms of the great challenges that lie ahead.

The challenge lies in the tens of thousands of combat veterans who are surviving, due to medical advances, horrific wounds that would have killed them only a few short years ago. The U.S. military reports that about 25,000 troops have been wounded in Iraq. Many of these wounds have been caused by the deadliest of insurgent weapons, “IED’s,” Impoverished Explosive Devices. The most incredible survival stories are of the loss of limbs, devastating burns, severe brain injuries, and acute psychological trauma. All of these injuries are permanent and life-altering.

And, from a recent CNN report, “The American people also need to know that combat medicine has vastly improved in the past 30 years. Ninety-four percent of those who make it to the 10th Combat Support Hospital in Bagdad leave alive; a survival number significantly higher than previous conflicts. But the increased survival rate also means that soldiers are coming home to us with wounds and injuries that will require long-term care.”

It may be impossible to imagine how these long-term injuries will affect the Iraq War wounded, their lives and the lives of their families, but one thing we may be certain, the effect on their lives will be forever. Freedom is not free and estimates of the cost to meet the needs of our returning veterans run as high as \$2.5 trillion.

They have done their duty to us and now it is time for us to share their commitment and their sacrifice and extend to them, their spouses, children, and families, the highest duty of care no matter what it takes, no matter how long it takes, no matter what it costs. No backing away, no backing, down, and no excuses.

As this war goes on veterans will be coming home alive, but in rough shape. They need and deserve the best medical care a grateful nation can provide. If they are able to work, they will need jobs, educations and housing. We must be prepared to meet these needs.

Too many of our military families already live on the edge. It will be too easy for these vulnerable and fragile war wounded to fall into poverty. They and their families cannot rebuild their lives and enjoy the bounty of liberty they so richly deserve, without our help. Soldiers and their families are rarely people of means. We already know that one in every three homeless individuals in The Commonwealth is a veteran, most of them

from the Vietnam War era. We have seen what happens first hand, post-Vietnam, when our nation abandons our veterans. I know that Americans are resolute that this shameful chapter in our history shall never be repeated.

It is time for us to step up to the plate and give voice, content, and meaning to the words “shared sacrifice.

In meeting these challenges, we can regain our sense of community and reconnect with each other. Each of us can help in our own way and be proud to be Americans. There are military families locally struggling with a loved one overseas. Reach out to them. None of us can do everything but each of us can do something. That’s the way we can move our nation forward in this great struggle.

In closing, we must remember President Lincoln’s charge from his second inaugural address in 1865, “To finish the work we are in; to bind up the nation’s wounds”; and, most significantly, “to care for him who shall have borne the battle, and for his widow and his orphan.” It is our response to Abraham Lincoln’s charge upon which we shall, as a nation, be judged.

I leave you with these thoughts as we celebrate Memorial Day 2007, and I hope and pray, as I know you do also, that when we meet next to honor our veterans, that our nation and the world shall be at peace.

Thank you to all our veterans for making this day possible and thank you for inviting me to share my reflections upon Memorial Day. This is the first of what I hope will be many opportunities for me to share with you, as your new state senator, moments of celebration and commemoration.