

What Are You Doing Memorial Day?

It was a spring morning in 1866, just after the Civil War that had devastated the South. A group of Southerners did something quite extraordinary. They marched down the streets of what was left of their town to a cemetery. There they decorated the graves of the soldiers, all the soldiers, Union as well as Confederate. The mothers and daughters and widows had buried their dead. Now they buried their hatred. The time for healing had come. It was the first Memorial Day. Memorial Day was called Decoration Day and it was a day when the cemeteries were filled with people kneeling to plant a flower or place a garland or unfurl a flag or to say a prayer. Some still do, but sadly, most people no longer bother, because it would take time away from the beach, the backyard, the ball park. At the National Cemetery on Long Island, one of the nation's largest, it has become necessary to advertise for volunteers to place flags on the graves of veterans as the number of veteran volunteers has decreased. However, many of those who volunteer have no idea why they are there. One young man, a 13-year-old Scout, was asked if he understood why the members of his Boy Scout Troop were there placing flags on the graves. He quickly replied, "To get service hours."

This Memorial Day we need to remember the debt we owe to others and we must remember the sacrifice of our soldiers. We owe an enormous debt of gratitude to all who have shed their blood on battle fields. Many of them gave their lives because they truly believed that freedom is worth dying for. To honor their sacrifice is not to glorify war. Sadly, we live in a cruel world where tyrants would impose their will on others. It would be nice if we lived in a world where people always played by the rules, where no one coveted his neighbor's property, where never again would we have to depend upon military might to enforce justice. But such a world does not yet exist. We do not know what dangers may yet await us. It would be nice if we could totally eliminate our defense establishment with the knowledge that no nation would ever commit aggression against its neighbor again. But that's not the way the world is. So in response to the world that we live in countless soldiers have been sacrificed in the cause of one noble ideal after another. Some of these wars have been senseless and barbaric, to be sure. But others have been necessary. We honor the memory this day of those who have given their lives believing that they were making the world safer, freer and more humane. We remember with sadness and gratitude the sacrifices others have made in our behalf. Praying that this Memorial Day you will take time to pause and remember the men and women who paid with their lives for the freedoms we cherish.