

May 26

Memorial Day as a Federal holiday observed on the last Monday in May (as stipulated in the Uniform Monday Holiday Act which went into effect in 1971), is only 49 years old. Before that, it was Decoration Day, with various observances in many places, (usually May 30th). Now, Memorial Day, Veterans Day, and Armed Forces Day mark occasions for those who serve in the military at present, those who served earlier, and those who died during their active service.

One might suppose that Memorial Day would be an opportunity for an official, unified, and solemn national remembrance with gratitude for those who gave “the last full measure of devotion”. But that has only been the case occasionally and regionally for the most part. The first observance came after the Civil War. There are records indicating that in May 1865—scant weeks after the surrender of Lee at Appomattox—freed slaves in Charleston, South Carolina adorned the graves of Union dead in thanks and commemoration. The official place and date given for the first memorial day observance is May 5, 1866, in Waterloo, NY. So it was that for over 100 years, Memorial Day was a local occasion—increasingly common, to be sure.

There’s another piece of the story, which is less well known in much of the country. Following the Civil War, southern states announced their own Memorial Days. These days, variously in late April and early May, are still observed in Florida, Alabama, Georgia, Mississippi, and South Carolina. Think about that. Faulkner, you see, was right: “The past is never dead. It’s not even past.”, (Requiem for a Nun).

Whatever else maintaining Confederate memorial days represents, it cannot escape our notice that the explicitly stated reason at the time for establishing the Confederate States of America was the maintaining and expanding of chattel slavery of black people. Any survey of the primary documents, writings, and speeches of the time make this abundantly clear, and no amount of bushwah to the contrary will erase that fact. “States’ Rights” was about the right to hold slaves. The armed conflict was started by the Southern States as a war of rebellion against the United States of America over the matter of slavery, plain and simple. Maintaining a separate memorial day is an open wound and a continuing act of rebellion.

I hope it is becoming harder and harder for people to maintain Confederate memorial days. In saying this I do not mean to imply that the Confederate dead are not worthy of remembrance, (I have ancestors on both sides of what one of my grandmothers used to call, “the late unpleasantness”, unless she was angry and called it “the war of Northern Aggression”), but I am absolutely sure that their cause was wrong, terribly wrong. If we gain nothing else, may it be that we face the moral challenge of confronting the fact that one may serve a bad cause well. One may be brave, honorable, and utterly wrong.

There is a terrible legacy to face also. The endless chain of hardship, deprivation, enslavement, suffering, mayhem, and terrible death visited on black Americans from 500 years ago down to the present day is nurtured by all manner of prejudice and

fantasy and enabled by legal, social, and economic barriers that still exist on every side. The current demonstration of this is found in the vastly different outcomes of covid-19 infections among black Americans (and other people of color) and white Americans. The disparity in mortality rates is simply stunning. Ultimately, the reason for this is not biological, but sociological.

With 100,000 deaths to date and counting, we've got plenty of people to remember, and with the disparities in our society coming into such stark and terrible relief, we will have ample reason to face the moral issues raised about life in America. The question is, where shall we go from here?