

Memorial Day, 2015

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Today is, quite possibly, the most important day of introspection and solemnity that we Americans universally observe. Depending upon which historian you consult, it may have been inaugurated to recognize the dead of the Revolutionary War in 1783 and called Jubilee Day. Others say it began about 150 years ago in our southern states when women decided that it was only right that they take it upon themselves to honor the service given their cause by the men and boys of the South. Many of those soldiers were unknown and lying in unmarked graves scattered in a rough triangle that began in New Mexico, stretched North and East to Pennsylvania, then south to Florida, and back West to its starting point.

It was, at first, a humble effort. Bouquets of wild flowers clutched in the hands of women and children who could afford nothing more were placed atop swollen mounds of mingled dead near hamlets with names like Shiloh, Tennessee; Corinth, Mississippi, and; Caving Banks, Oklahoma.

Our nation soon recognized how appropriate this observance was for all of the nation's war dead, and the first national observance was organized in 1868 by the Commander of The Grand Army of the Republic, an association of Union War Veterans.

In the 1800s and for the first half of the 1900s, Americans generally observed the event on May 30th, but that date fell victim to commercial interests and citizen disillusion, and in 1971 the last Monday in May became the day upon which Memorial Day is celebrated in most states. It is painfully obvious that commercial interests believe Memorial Day is a good day to plug sales of their wares. It's a big day for picnics and parades, too, and perhaps most communities will host a solemn observance at a local cemetery or shoreline.

I wonder, though, if all of the sales marking the summer buying season and the noisy beer parties aren't masking something.

As we meet here today, during these few minutes we spend observing Memorial Day and remembering our war dead, some veteran back home or soldier serving in today's military will commit suicide. I don't mean one person in this 24-hour period. Some man or woman who is wearing or has worn our uniform will die of self-inflicted injury, and it will happen in this hour as we sit here today. If you wonder whether this epidemic is something new, let me assure you that it is not. It may be more frequent

today, but it is not a unique, new phenomenon growing out of our last decade of war. At some point, the number of suicides exceeded the number of deaths related to combat wounds in Afghanistan.

According to the psychology and psychiatry website MedicalXpress dot com, 2015 data published on May 4th shows "... veterans are at a high risk for suicide – every day roughly 22 veterans commit suicide." Active military suicides are not included in that number.

The problem is particularly evident among young veterans, and an increasing percentage of those suicides are women.

The usual attitude from those who first hear of this epidemic is to wonder aloud how weak those who take their own lives must be, but it is exactly that attitude that has kept many service members and veterans from seeking help. What is truly odd about this horrifying phenomenon is that the more actively a veteran seeks help, the lower the probability of that individual taking his or her own life. Yes, we have all heard the news reports about a broken VA system, but that system should be the first stop for a veteran in distress.

In combat, the person who saves lives will be rewarded. The public will call him or her a "hero," and the probability of that person receiving an award is quite high.

It is time now for each of us to become a hero. We won't receive a decoration, but we may well save a life. Be alert. Watch for the signs: Social isolation, excessive alcohol use, depression – these are common indicators.

Memorial Day is the day on which we recognize our military and veterans who have answered that final muster. It is a small imposition asked of those of us still alive. Of much greater value is taking a few hours to help a veteran or a member of the military who is in peril. It's time that each of us accepted the challenge.

It's time for each of us to become a hometown hero.