American Holidays Memorial Day

THE AMERICAN LEGION

SUGGESTED ADDRESS

NUMBER 208

- - -

PREPARED ADDRESS FOR
AMERICAN LEGION SPEAKERS
MEMORIAL DAY, 1970

For God and Country

National Public Relations Division

P.O. Box 1055
Indianapolis, Indiana 46206
(317)-635-8411

1608 K St., N.W.
Washington, D.C. 20006
(202)-393-4811

Ladies and gentlemen, Memorial Day, as we know it, was officially proclaimed 102 years ago today and first had its inception in the South. There, following the close of the War Between the States, the women of the Confederacy decked with flowers, impartially, the graves of their own and of the Union soldiers. This splendid spirit, coming as it did on the heels of years of bitter war and intense sectional feelings, deeply stirred the North.

This emotion was crystalized by the Grand Army of the Republic. The idea of a national Decoration Day, as it was first called, originated with a GAR member - Adjutant General N.P. Chipman. On May 5, 1866, General John A. Logan, then commander-in-chief of the GAR, issued the first Memorial Day proclamation, designating the observance for May 30.

That first proclamation of Memorial Day declared in part:

"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.

The general order concluded with these words:

"It is the purpose of the commander-in-chief to inaugurate this observance with the hope that it will be kept up from year to year, while a survivor of the war remains to honor his departed comrades."

Perhaps some of the words and phrases strike our modern ears as a little old fashioned. But, as individuals, and members of a great patriotic organization, The American Legion, I am happy we still seek to abide with the spirit of that first proclamation.

Today, my friends, there are no survivors of that Grand Army of the Republic. The GAR has passed into history. It has been mustered into the army of tradition.

Today, my fellow Americans, also marks the last year Memorial Day, Veterans Day and other patriotic holidays will be observed on their traditional dates.

On June 28, 1968, former President Johnson signed into law PL 90-363, enacted by the 90th Congress, changing Memorial Day from May 30 to the last Monday in May, as well as Veterans Day, from Nov. 11 to the fourth Monday in October. This act shall take effect on January 1, 1971.

Memorial Day is a day sacred to the hearts of all true Americans. On this day we pay tribute to those who have sacrificed everything so that our nation and its blessing shall be perpetuated. It is not a day of revelry or 3-day holiday convenience but one of solemn reflection and re-dedication to the principles which have made America great.

The American Legion is on record through Resolution No. 15 approved at the 50th Annual National Convention of The American Legion, in New Orleans, Louisiana, September 10-12, 1968, opposing the tampering with two sacred and hallowed holidays that are very close to the veterans of all wars. The resolution stipulates that since Memorial Day and Veterans Day are symbolic to veterans of all wars, it is felt that these two days set aside to honor our deceased veterans and living veterans of all wars should not be set to coincide with extended weekends.

The resolution further stipulates that The American Legion seeks legislation to amend Public Law No. 90-363, leaving Memorial Day as May 30 and Veterans Day as November 11.

Past National Commander Martin B. McKneally, United States Congressman from New York, acting upon the Convention Committee's resolution introduced H.R. 6247, which seeks to amend Public Law 90-363, leaving Memorial Day as May 30 and Veterans Day as November 11. However, as of this date, attempts to amend PL 90-363 have been rather futile.

To you, from failing hands, we throw

The torch; be yours to hold it high.

You will recognize those lines from the most famous poem inspired by World War I - Colonel John McCrae's "In Flanders Field." Colonel McCrae himself sleeps in Flanders Field.

We should not, at this time, let our spirits fail or our interest lag, due to a change in date. Memorial Day had its beginnings in our country's desire to honor all the gallant American patriots who have given up their lives in its wars to preserve and perpetuate our freedom. To us, from failing hands, they have thrown the torch. It is ours to hold it high. It is to our heroic defenders -- all the brave Americans who died on the battlefields at home and abroad -- from the Revolutionary War to the present war in Vietnam -- that our Country as a whole owes a particular debt -- the debt of having for our own priceless heritage the free America we enjoy today.

It is but the simplest tribute we pay when we take time to remember gratefully the services which our soldiers of the past have rendered, services which some are performing today in Vietnam. No nation incapable of gratitude to its defenders can expect the long life which every nation seeks. Today, it is the soldiers, sailors, marines and airmen who fell in our wars from the beginning of the nation who are entitled to respect. They were the casualities in a nation's struggle for security. They gave the most precious possession men can hold to protect the security of others. In the prime of life, they surrendered a lifetime of living to guarantee us a lifetime of freedom.

Frivolous diversions of interests do not fill the mind of the families of our heroic dead on Memorial Day. They share the memories of those who did not come home. Their loved ones who believed that life without liberty is more hateful than war. Those heroic dead who preferred battle to the loss of country or the betrayal of human institutions which carry the hopes of men. They were in direct

opposition to our present day cowardice "peace at any price" Moratorium Day supporters and other parasites who have avoided fighting for our country and have given aid and comfort to America's enemy by their actions inside our nation.

These hallowed dead gave their all -- including lifetimes of unfilled living -- to assure us freedom, security and peace. Look at their tombstone! Etch their names into your memory! They are the names of Americans who really mattered in American history! But for them and for their devotion we would have no America.

The American Legion joins in this Memorial Day tribute with an especial sense of its significance and of those heroes' services by reason of the service which its own members gave during the time of armed conflict. But theirs is a tribute which is by far finer than all the tributes ever paid by words and songs and waving banners and marching columns and stirring music. It is our adopted national theme of "Unity and Service for America--U.S.A.," the theme our National Commander J. Milton Patrick has selected this year. It is precisely that tribute which The American Legion seeks with its whole soul to pay, a tribute not of a day, not of an hour only, not of a formal exercise, but a tribute of the inner spirit and of the constant life of day after day and year after year, a tribute of service and of deeds like the service given, the deeds performed by those in whose honor this special day has been set aside.

American Legionnaires learned the lesson of service in the sternest school in which that lesson is taught -- the school of war. When they organized the Legion, these former servicemen wished to be of continuing service in time of peace. In the very act of <u>uniting</u> into this organization, they proclaimed a purpose to <u>serve</u> "community, state and nation" -- a purpose voiced in the preamble of their constitution.

To make America better and to make better Americans ---that is the spirit of The American Legion, the animating thought of all the activities and programs which the Legion has undertaken in its <u>purpose</u>.

First in the thought of Legionnaires, naturally, is the disabled war veteran. After the disabled come the orphaned and dependent children of veterans. Through Economic, National Security, Americanism, Child Welfare, Rehabilitation, Foreign Relations and Legislative Programs, some of the many services of The American Legion are performed.

All over the country Legion posts by the hundreds are engaged in local and state activities in upbuilding their own communities, in securing for their people the fullest possible use of the facilities and opportunities available for them and in providing others which are needed. Support of our Country and the President, revitalization of interest in patriotism and flag programs, programs of collecting and distributing food, clothing and other necessities to the needy -- these are some of the many things which posts have done and are doing in carrying out their "individual obligation" to their communities.

Such matters as these -- the rehabilitation of the disabled, caring for the children who suffered by the wars, national security and measures to bring about permanent peace -- are all proper subjects for discussion and reflection on Memorial Day. These problems were brought about by the wars, the same wars that took such a costly toll of human life. We must ever keep faith with our soldier dead by meeting the problems of the nation and solving them in the best way we know how. The men who have died for America will have died in vain if we fail to perpetuate those ideals and principles which they held more dear than life itself. This day should serve to remind each and every American citizen of their individual obligations and duties to flag and country. Our nation was founded, and it has grown to greatness, through the self sacrifice of its patriots. The spirit of their sacrifice is abroad in the land today and from it we should gain a renewed inspiration to give freely of our efforts to make America a better land and to serve in unity in whatever humble capacity may fall our lot. In this way we will realize the full significance of Memorial Day and our words of tribute to the nation's war dead will come to have a real meaning.

# # #

Thank you, ladies and gentlemen, for your kind attention. I am honored to have been able to speak on this occasion.