

WHAT SO ★ PROUDLY ★ WE HAIL

The American Soul in Story, Speech, and Song

Remarks on Memorial Day

JOHN MCCAIN

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On Wednesday, May 25, 2011, the American Enterprise Institute and the Hudson Institute hosted a book forum, “Why Memorial Day?,” featuring Senator John McCain and the coeditors of What So Proudly We Hail: The American Soul in Story, Speech, and Song. Command Sergeant Major Michael T. Hall, US Army (ret.) and William Kristol also gave remarks.

A reading of Civil War veteran and Supreme Court Justice Oliver Wendell Holmes Jr.’s “In Our Youth Our Hearts Were Touched with Fire” served as the starting point for a discussion of the meaning and importance of Memorial Day.

In my youth, I observed Memorial Day as many Americans will this coming weekend—as the unofficial beginning of summer and a good day, weather permitting, for outdoor recreation. A day off of work to play golf and softball, go fishing, hike, have picnics, head to the beach. However, I have found that the older I become the more meaning Memorial Day holds. Whether you have served in uniform or not, Memorial Day is a time for retrospection and appreciation of the sacrifices made by others on our behalf. In addition to the picnics and celebrations, in cemeteries all over the country this weekend buglers will sound Taps to remind us of the sacrifices the day is intended to commemorate.

At Arlington National Cemetery, soldiers from the 3rd US Infantry Brigade will place a small American flag at the headstone of more than a quarter million graves; headstones that bear names of every ethnic origin; that mark the final resting places of professional soldiers and conscripts; rich and poor; Christian, Jew, and Muslim; believer and nonbeliever; dark-skinned and white; city dwellers and people from small towns and rural communities; teachers and machinists; day laborers and presidents. Families in every place in America have a relative or ancestor buried there.

Besides their common humanity, only one thing for certain connects each of the men and women who are interred at Arlington, and with their fellow veterans resting in all our cemeteries and in foreign fields around the world. They loved our country and risked everything to defend her.

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At Gettysburg, Belleau Wood, Iwo Jima and Midway, Normandy and the Ardennes Forest, the Chosin Reservoir, Khe San and the I Drang Valley, Kandahar and Fallujah, all these battles, all these grim tests of courage and character, have made a legend of the combat veteran's devotion to duty in every community in America. It is a lesson in courage and patriotism that helps instruct those who defend our country today in their duty. And it instructs those of us who won't have the privilege and the burden of bearing arms for our country.

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Our country doesn't depend on the heroism of every citizen. But all of us should be worthy of the sacrifices made on our behalf. We have to love our freedom, not just for the private opportunities it provides, but for the goodness it makes possible. We have to love it as much, even if not as heroically, as the brave Americans who defend us at the risk and often the cost of their lives. We must love it enough to argue about it, and to work together to serve its interests, in whatever way our abilities permit and our conscience requires, whether it calls us to arms or to altruism or to politics.

You know, as well as I, the world we live in is an uncertain one. It still holds dangers for us and for everyone for whom freedom is the habit of their heart. Man's inhumanity to man is an evil that will never be entirely extinct. And no matter how long a peace endures, it is always temporary. Americans will always be asked again to bear burdens that only the brave can endure. That burden will be their honor, as it once was ours.

But it is a better world than our fathers inherited and their fathers before them; a world purchased at great and terrible cost by sacrifices on killing grounds that are now green fields and quiet beaches in peaceful corners of the world. We should be proud of what they did; proud and humble. Humble in the knowledge that we enjoy our freedom because of the devotion of Americans who sacrificed greatly to secure the blessings of liberty to ourselves and our posterity—those Americans for whom duty, honor, their comrades, and love of country were more dear to them than life itself.

When the time came for them to answer their country's call and fight on a field they did not know, they came. And on small islands, dense jungles, and mountainsides, in the air and on and below the water, they served well the country that sent them there. In the fog of hard battles, won and lost, they held high a lantern of courage and faith that illuminated the way home with honor.

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History does not remember all of them as individuals. We don't even know where they all rest. But we must not forget what they did. Their honor is eternal and will live in our country for so long as she remains worthy of their sacrifice. They were family and friends to some, heroes to all—who lived, fought, and died for the safety and future of a great and good nation.

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God bless them and grant them perpetual peace.

Thank you.



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