

WHAT SO ★ PROUDLY ★ WE HAIL

The American Soul in Story, Speech, and Song

General Orders No. 11

JOHN A. LOGAN

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Our current holiday of Memorial Day traces its origins to this document. John A. Logan (1826–86) was a Mexican War veteran and congressman from Illinois when, in 1862, he resigned his seat to join the Union Army. Wounded at the Battle of Fort Donelson, Logan saw extensive action in the western theater and rose to the rank of major general. After the war, he resumed his political career, first as senator and later as an (unsuccessful) candidate for vice president, and also helped found the Grand Army of the Republic, a Union veteran’s organization, leading the effort to establish a holiday in memory of the soldiers who died in defense of the Union.

What, according to this order, is the purpose of Decoration Day? For what reasons do we honor these dead? Why should we do it communally? Why is strewing the graves with flowers a fitting tribute?

General Orders No. 11

Headquarters, Grand Army of the Republic
Washington, DC, May 5, 1868

I. The 30th day of May, 1868, is designated for the purpose of strewing with flowers, or otherwise decorating, the grave of comrades who died in defense of their country during the late rebellion, and whose bodies now lie in almost every city, village, hamlet, and churchyard in the land. In this observance, no form or ceremony is prescribed, but posts and comrades will, in their own way, arrange such fitting services and testimonials of respect as circumstances may permit.

We are organized, comrades, as our regulations tell us, for the purpose, among other things, “of preserving and strengthening those kind and fraternal feelings which have bound together the soldiers, sailors, and marines, who united to suppress the late rebellion.” What can aid more to assure this result than by cherishing tenderly the memory of our heroic dead, who made their breasts a barricade between our country and its foes? Their soldier lives were the reveille of freedom to a race in chains, and their

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deaths the tattoo¹ of rebellious tyranny in arms. We should guard their graves with sacred vigilance. All that the consecrated wealth and taste of the nation can add, to their adornment and security, is but a fitting tribute to the memory of her slain defenders. Let no wanton foot tread rudely on such hallowed grounds. Let pleasant paths invite the coming and going of reverent visitors and fond mourners. Let no vandalism of avarice or neglect, no ravages of time, testify to the present or to the coming generations that we have forgotten, as a people, the cost of a free and undivided Republic.

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If other eyes grow dull and other hands slack, and other hearts cold in the solemn trust, ours shall keep it well, as long as the light and warmth of life remain to us.

Let us, then, at the time appointed, gather around their sacred remains, and garland the passionless mounds above them with choicest flowers of springtime; let us raise above them the dear old flag they saved from dishonor; let us, in this solemn presence, renew our pledges to aid and assist those whom they have left among us, as sacred charges upon the nation's gratitude,—the soldier's and sailor's widow and orphan.

II. It is the purpose of the Commander-in-Chief to inaugurate this observance, with the hope it will be kept up from year to year, while a survivor of the war remains to honor the memory of his departed comrades. He earnestly desires the public press to call attention to this order, and lend its friendly aid in bringing it to the notice of comrades in all parts of the country, in time for simultaneous compliance therewith.

III. Department commanders will use every effort to make this order effective.

By order of:

JOHN A. LOGAN

Commander-in-Chief.

N.P. CHIPMAN

Adjutant-General.

¹ *An evening drum or bugle signal recalling soldiers to their quarters.*