

Peter H. Gibbon

How Should We Remember?

On May 30, 1868, children all over America picked wild flowers and placed them on the graves of soldiers. In Washington, they wore mourning scarves and decorated the graves of men unknown who had died at the Battle of Bull Run. Four thousand citizens marched to the National Cemetery in Richmond and marked each of 7,000 graves with a miniature American flag. In Baltimore, disabled veterans witnessed ceremonies from horse-drawn wagons. "Every hero was honored and every grave had its share of flowers," reported a citizen of Illinois. It was just after the Civil War, our first Memorial Day.

In towns and cities from Nantucket to Sacramento, governors and generals extolled bravery and self-sacrifice. Cannons fired. Ministers gave thanks for a reunited nation and the abolition of slavery and searched for God's purpose behind the slaughter of 620,000 men.

In New York, still dressed in black, Josephine Shaw Lowell, 25 years old, remembered her dead brother and husband. Col. Robert Gould Shaw, her brother, had been cut down underneath the stone walls of Fort Wagner, S.C., in 1863 with half of the 54th African American Regiment—the regiment portrayed in the movie "Glory." Short of food and water and under constant fire from well-protected gunners, the soldiers had displayed extraordinary courage.

Charles Lowell, Josephine's husband, had been shot through the spine at Cedar Creek, Va., in 1864. Wounded once, he had insisted on remounting his horse and leading a final charge.

Josephine thought of her brother and husband as heroes because of their bravery in battle and commitment to abolition. She resolved to honor their deaths by becoming a social reformer who would make America better. After the Civil War, she traveled to Virginia to teach former slaves. Returning to New York City, she spent the next 35 years visiting prisons and poorhouses, campaigning for parks and better schools and fighting for civil service reform and the rights of workers.

Today, on Memorial Day, we will shop, play golf, mow the lawn, turn our faces to the sun and think of summer. Young children will sit on their fathers' shoulders at small-town parades, unaware of what the uniforms and bands commemorate. Amusement parks will open; department

will catch television clips of baseball games, rock concerts, the car race at Indianapolis. On the nightly news, we might glimpse the white crosses of Arlington Cemetery. We are content to let others mourn and remember.

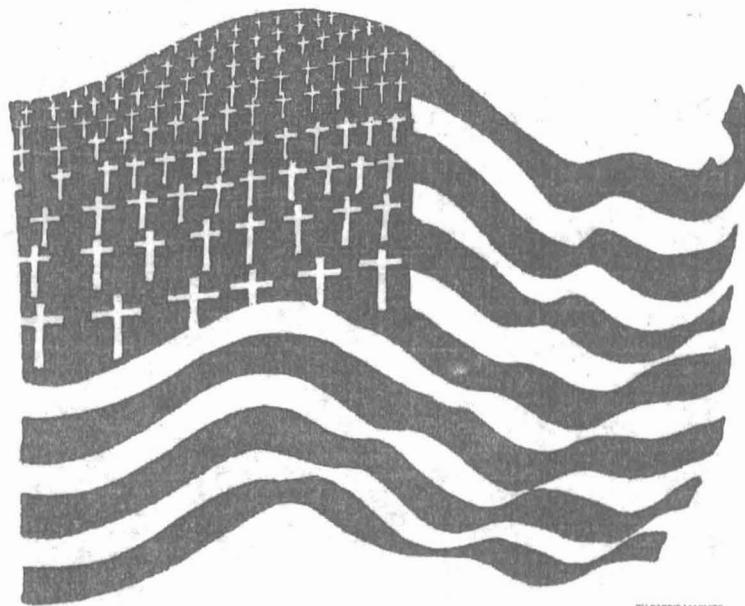
In May it is not pleasant to think of death. At peace, why think of war? Nor are we a nation of widows and orphans surrounded by the remains of men in graves still fresh. And most of us are lucky to have escaped the carnage of our own, violent century. With Russia now our ally, conflict seems remote. The Gulf War was short and celebrated smart bombs. Today we are embarrassed by the words "manly," "honor," "duty" and "hero." We have no ear for patriotic speeches. And we are impatient with rituals.

Without conscription, many Americans have no firsthand experience with the military. Relying on the media for our information, we come to associate soldiers with scandal. We hear about cheating at Annapolis, sexism at the Citadel, Tailhook, brutal initiation rites on Parris Island. We forget the skill and daring of pilots and lose sight of the many Marines who have won the Congressional Medal of Honor. Without basic training, it is easy to become dismissive of physical hardship and military courage.

In schools, our young people are raised on "A Farewell to Arms" and the anti-war poems of Wilfred Owen. They know all about the incarceration of Asian Americans during World War II, but not much about Audie Murphy, the war's most decorated soldier. They know a lot about entertainers, little about heroes. Familiar with America's flaws, they are less knowledgeable about its accomplishments. Cynicism has eradicated civic pride.

So, in peaceful, prosperous, irreverent America, how should we make sense of Memorial Day? How can we pay tribute to the 1,300,000 soldiers who have lost their lives in America's wars? We cannot be as solemn and fervent as our ancestors in 1868, nor as bellicose as Theodore Roosevelt in 1898. After Verdun and Hiroshima, who can romanticize war? After Vietnam, who can say America is infallible? But dare we remain cynical, suspicious of our past, disdainful of our soldiers?

We do not have to love war to understand its brutal necessity. Not serving in the military, we can still respect the values of soldiers: loyalty, discipline and endurance. Comfortable at the end of the Cold War, we



BY BARRIE MAGUIRE

"We do not have to love war to understand its brutal necessity. Not serving in the military, we can still respect the values of soldiers: loyalty, discipline and endurance."

On the Boston Common facing the State Building stands a bronze sculpture of Robert Gould Shaw and the African Americans of the 54th Regiment. The sculpture was dedicated on Memorial Day in 1897. Behind it, on the stone wall facing the park, are etched the names of the soldiers who died with Shaw at Fort Wagner. All over the country—on the sides of statues, underneath American flags, on granite walls, in chapels and cemeteries—are engraved the names of those once thought heroes.

On this day we should look at our memorials and pay attention to the names inscribed, feel pity for lives cut short and families bereaved, and recognize bravery and sacrifice. We might look to Josephine Shaw Lowell, who, by dedicating herself to equality and social justice, extracted meaning from war and consolation from death, and made

On Memorial Day, we can be grateful for an America made possible by the sacrifice of our soldiers—an America never invaded, a country of unlimited opportunity and incomparable abundance. We need to remember the good in our past and take note of our progress, to be proud that America is self-critical and learns from its mistakes, and to celebrate a country that fought against slavery and totalitarianism. We also need to remember that we can enjoy this weekend because others, in less comfortable times, gave up their lives.

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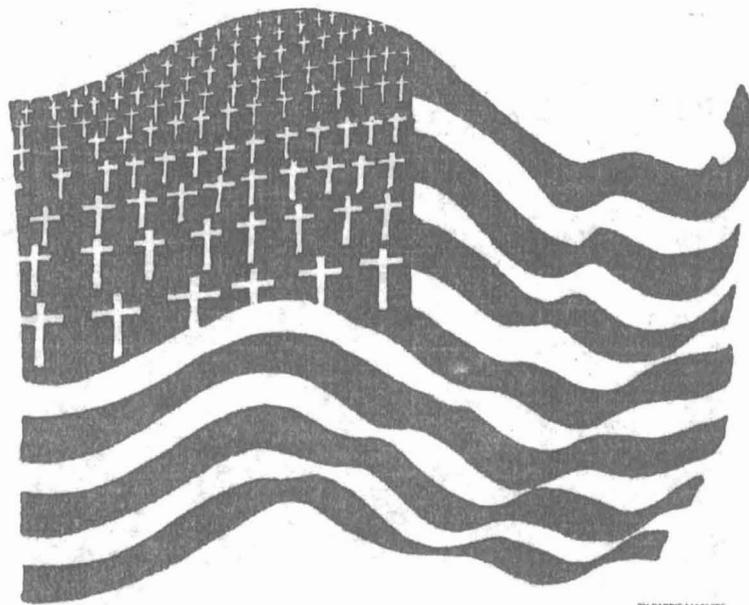
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