

SERMON - Memorial Day

Honoring Those Who Served...

A couple of years ago , a counter-insurgency consultant was brought in to speak to a group of Army officers. He started his presentation with "Ladies and Gentlemen, America is at War."

Immediately a voice comes up from the back "Sir, you are wrong. The US Army is at war, America is at the Mall."

What is Memorial Day? Memorial Day? Or is it Mall Day? It seems kind of odd that we have turned a day of reflection and remembrance into a three-day shopping extravaganza.

The origins of Memorial Day begin shortly after the Civil War, very shortly. The first memorial day was observed by former slaves at the Washington Race Course (today the location of [Hampton Park](#)) in Charleston, South Carolina. The race course had been used as a temporary Confederate prison camp in 1865, as well as a mass grave for Union soldiers who died there. Immediately after the cessation of hostilities, formerly enslaved people exhumed the bodies from the mass grave and reinterred them properly with individual graves. They built a fence around the graveyard with an entry arch and declared it a Union graveyard. The work was completed in only ten days.

On May 1, 1865, the Charleston newspaper reported, remember the war ended in April, that a crowd of up to ten thousand, mainly black residents, including 2800 children, processed to the location for a celebration which included sermons, singing, and a picnic on the grounds, thereby creating the first Decoration Day.

Several communities in both the north and south set aside specific dates to honor their neighbors who died in the war. It was first observed in Waterloo, NY on May 5, 1866. On May 5, 1868, retired General John Morgan, issued a proclamation in his position as commander-in-chief of the Grand Army of the Republic, a veterans organization, that Decoration Day should be recognized nationwide. It was observed for the first time on May 30th of the same year, the date was chosen because it was not the anniversary of a battle. The tombs of fallen Union soldiers were decorated in remembrance. Different locations in the south chose other dates to honor their fallen.

Following WWI , the day was expanded to honor those who have died in all American wars. The use of the name Memorial Day did not become wide spread until after WWII. In June 1968, Congress passed a bill that moved three holidays from their traditional dates to a specific Monday, which included Memorial Day.

In 2000, congress passed and the President signed into law The National Moment of Remembrance which encourages all Americans to pause wherever they are at 3 p.m. local time on Memorial Day for a minute of silence to remember and honor those who have died in service to the nation.

We have several memorials and monuments in Kitsap County, ranging from the Port Gamble grave of sailor Gustav Englebrecht, who was killed in 1856 during the Indian Wars to the Tomb of the Unknown Soldier at Ivey Green Cemetery in Bremerton, to a community memorial in Manchester, to one at the Silverdale Harley Davidson dealership.

I have a couple of favorite Memorial Day Weekend events. One occurred yesterday. It's called *The Unforgotten, Run to Tahoma*. Yesterday, in a brief ceremony we received the unclaimed remains of four deceased veterans in the care of the county coroner and took them to Tahoma National Cemetery. These veterans did not die during a war. They quietly passed away during the past year, leaving no estate or anyone who claimed their remains. Yesterday, we had about 300 people attend the service we provided in the parking lot of the county coroner's office. Following the ceremony, in a cortege of over 200 motorcycles and cars, we transported them to Tahoma National Cemetery for internment. If you happened to be stalled in traffic yesterday, between noon and 1:30 on highways 3, 16, I-5 or highway 18, I make no apologies.

One of my favorite Memorial Day services is at the Kitsap County Veterans Memorial in Waterfront Park in Silverdale. The Silverdale Rotary Club hosts the "Silent Ceremony" which is preceded by a string quartet concert. The concert starts at five pm with the quartet playing classical music and pop tunes for different eras. During the concert, mingling, sharing stories, leaving mementos on the memorial are encouraged. At 6:00 pm the Silent Ceremony begins with *Amazing Grace*, while a small group of veterans lays a wreath on the memorial. A

bugler plays *Taps*, and it's over in five minutes. No speeches, no politics, a *Silent Ceremony*.

Who are these people that go off to war? And why the hell do they go?

It's a two step process, first you need to join one of the branches of the service, the 2nd step is they get to decide where you are going to go.

There was a worst case scenario. You could have been drafted.

How many of you were born after December 1953? You escaped the draft.

Actually the draft did have some positive benefits during the sixties, Kids stayed in college longer, especially the ones with rich parents. Men married their girlfriends, and Dick Cheney received five deferments.

And there was an added benefit of the "civilian influence" brought by draftees in the service. Which I sometimes consider a good reason to bring it back.

During the fifties, judges used the military as a '*deferred sentence*' option for young offenders. Want to go to jail or would you like to enlist? I have a cousin who decided to enlist.

Many enlist because of pure altruism, enlistments went up after Pearl Harbor, 9/11. In 1964 I enlisted because I just needed to get out of town and needed someone to take care of me.

Once you are in, your life is no longer your own. It becomes a mish mash of people of every color and creed from across the country. All of you are stripped of your rights, your clothes, and your ego. In return you become physically and mentally stronger, learn to work as a team, and quadruple your vocabulary of expletives.

You discover loyalty, courage, duty and what it means to belong to a brother and sisterhood.

Now we're going to take a little shift.

One of the strengths of UUism is its passion for social justice and peace.

How many of you were 'Rads' during the sixties? Radicals. Interesting.

Those were the good old days, huh? Sex, drugs and rock and roll?

Is there a Unitarian Universalist approach to war and peace? How do you "support the troops" when you oppose the war?

In 2003, Neil Shister wrote about our conundrum in an article titled *Embattled Faith*. You can find it at UUA.org

I have liberally plagiarized from it. Actually, that's too kind. Stealing is probably more appropriate.

According to UUA historians, we are neither a peace church or a militant church.

We have a "dynamic tension" between our pacifism and pragmatism. And it goes back and forth between wars.

Here are some examples:

A Universalist minister served as a Chaplain in the Continental Army during the Revolutionary War.

Unitarians were opposed to the War of 1812.

The Rev. Edmund Hamilton Sears wrote the Christmas carol *It Came Upon a Midnight Clear* as a peace hymn in response to the Mexican–American war.

We overwhelmingly supported the Union side of the civil war. Poet Julia Ward Howe wrote *Battle Hymn of the Republic* which became the anthem of the Union Army.

Ten years later, appalled by the carnage of the Franco-Prussian War, she did an about face issuing a proclamation for the first Mother's Day in the name of peace.

WWI prompted a lively debate. Former president William Howard Taft served as moderator for the 1917 General Assembly that overwhelmingly voted 236-9 in favor to support the war. In 1918, the American Unitarian Association board went on to say that any church whose minister did not support the War effort would not be considered eligible for assistance from the national association. The board formally apologized for their statement in 1936.

Unitarians generally supported WWII as a just war. In 1942, the UA president proclaimed that Churches stood together in the overthrow of totalitarian governments. But he also appealed on behalf of conscientious objectors.

He said:

"We all recognize the necessity for national unity in a time of grave national peril, but it is fatally easy for us to forget that there is a basic respect for the rights of individuals to think and act in accordance with the dictates of their own consciences that no need for unity of national purpose or effort supersedes. . . . Our churches should make it a very special part of their business to watch for any infringement of this right."

Then along came Viet Nam. It tore the UU community. Congregants didn't appreciate their ministers becoming overly politicized, some left their congregations because of the absolutism displayed by opponents of the war.

When some churches declared themselves sanctuaries for draft deserters, some thought, including those opposed to the war, that their church shouldn't be in a position of breaking the law.

Rev. Dr. John Buehrens, former UUA president and minister of the First Parish in Needham, Massachusetts says since Viet Nam, "we have we have a large chunk of people in the denomination who do their moral reasoning the way the historic peace churches do, believing participation in the military and the use of violence is never personally justified."

On the other hand you have the comments of Rev. David Hubner, director of ministry and professional leadership for the UUA and a Naval officer before entering the ministry. Referring to Iraq, Hubner says "Am I in favor of this war?" "Hell no! Do I want to support the people who are fighting it? Yes. We don't want to demonize them and render harm like we did to the people who fought in Vietnam by turning them into outcasts."

What does it mean to say that the war was bad, but our soldiers good? Can a war be unjustified but its actors blameless? How bad does a war have to be before the soldiers themselves are wrong to fight it?

There are a couple of ways to look at it. In the past decade, there have been two approaches to fashioning US foreign policy.

One is the Jacksonian tradition, following the election of Andrew Jackson in 1828. By eliminating property ownership as requirement for voting, he turned our country into a mass democracy. It is a self-reliant, egalitarian, free-spoken, and entrepreneurial tradition. Jacksonians' approach foreign policy in a very different spirit—one in which honor, concern for reputation, and faith in military institutions play a much greater role. Jacksonian realism is based on the very sharp distinction in popular feeling between the inside of our country and the dark world without. . . . Jacksonians have the least regard for international law and international institutions. . . . The second key concept in Jacksonian thought about war is that the strategic and tactical objective of American forces is to impose our will on the enemy with as few American casualties as possible.”

The counter point to this militant approach is one that favors a more indirect approach, or "soft power." Soft power doesn't deny the use of the military, but uses a country's culture, values, and ideology to expand its influence.

The measure of a country's soft power is its attractiveness to foreigners—the respect they accord its ideals and institutions, the enthusiasm with which they embrace its entertainment and lifestyle, the zeal they have to attend its schools and emulate its institutions.

So, you didn't know that Starbucks and Macdonald's are part of our foreign policy?

Classic music lovers may cringe, but think about the impact of rock and roll during the cold war? I'm actually serious about that one.

A country that wields soft power effectively gets others to embrace its own agenda voluntarily (and sometimes without even knowing it).

Simply paraphrased "If I can get you *to want to do* what I want, then I do not have to force you "to do what you do not want to do."

Great Britain's dominance in the 19th century was due to its use of soft power.

Our current administration seems to be using soft power by being more cooperative through working with and encouraging international legal regimes and institutions that organize collective responses to looming global problems that are particularly threatening to America, like weapons proliferation and terrorism.

So which is more "UU"? Jacksonian or Soft Power?

Mr. Shister finishes his article with the following:

"The challenge facing religious liberals, it now seemed to me, is to refute the neo-conservatives in contemporary twenty-first-century terms that are persuasive enough to reassure people who perceive themselves under on-going threat. To do so will require an argument that simultaneously endorses a state possessed of

sufficient power to protect its citizens while still maintaining a compelling case for the best aspects of our tradition—faith in reason, . . . respect for diversity, ... the inherent dignity of each individual. What I came to realize, at the end of my labors, was that this is going to be no mean feat. "

Shister ends by saying..."The propositions we have traditionally invoked, risk sounding dangerously naïve in an age of global terrorism. The difficulty so many of us had in crafting a satisfactory response to Iraq—the first battle in this new age of global anxiety—can perhaps best be understood finally as a wake-up call that those of us who tilt toward the antiwar side of the spectrum will need a revitalized, credible argument for peace."

So what the heck does all of this have to do with Memorial Day?

In order to shoot an arrow, you have to have an arrow. And you need an archer and bow. Our elected government is the archer and bow. Our sons and daughters are the arrow.

They go where they are pointed regardless if they want to or not. I cannot imagine what it would be like to spend six months to a year at sea. Tom you have my admiration. I don't know how you did it, especially crammed into a submarine.

When I was in Viet Nam, the most popular song was *We Gotta Get Out of this Place*.

Most of my comrades did not, shall we say, enjoy their sojourn with the Army. But they did their duty, and they did it well. That was my experience.

A few minutes ago, Tom asked you if you knew or were related to a veteran. Now think about the void in your life if that person did not return.

Memorial Day is not about politics. It is not about just or evil wars. It is simply a day to remember all those sons and daughters who did their duty, regardless if they wanted to or not, and made ultimate sacrifice - for us - over the past 240 years.

Go in peace.