



A Memorial Day Resolution: Add Fewer Graves

Not all, of course, answered the call. Some fled to what Vice President Agnew would sneeringly call the "deserters dens" of Canada and Sweden. Others were conscientious objectors. Many more discovered an added incentive to study hard in college and then go on to "grad" school. Student deferments were very popular with those who opposed the war. America, they said, was on the "Eve of Destruction." Most American believed our nation and our world were being made safer by our legions of fighting men and especially by elite warriors known as Navy SEALs, Recon Marines, and the Army's Green Berets.



Our Vietnam adventure was directed by what Halberstam or his publishers named, in the title of the aforementioned book, *The Best and the Brightest*. They were the cream of what Tom Brokaw would later call *The Greatest Generation*, the (mostly) young men of the class of World War II, led by a Harvard-educated PT Boat skipper named John Fitzgerald Kennedy. They came to Washington determined to rescue America from the seeming complacency and blandness of the Eisenhower years. The theme, stressed over and again by the youngest man ever elected President, was to "get America moving again." Where we were going seemed to matter less than that were moving. Estes Kefauver had campaigned for President in a coonskin cap, but Kennedy summoned us to a New Frontier, in which we would conquer hunger, disease, Communism, and outer space. Even the moon would be caught up in our cosmic conflict between good and evil, the Free World versus Communism. We had to get there before the Soviet Union. We got there, as Kennedy had said we would, by the end of the decade.

By coincidence, Kennedy's birth date is the day before Memorial Day, on May 29. He was born in 1917 in the same month that America entered the First World War. He served in World War II and died during in the early stages of the Vietnam War. He could not, of course, remember the spirit of exuberance and sheer cockiness with which a young America went to war at the time of his birth, confidently telling ourselves and our European allies not to worry because, in the words of a popular song of the day, "The Yanks are coming, the Yanks are coming/And we won't come back 'till it's over Over There!"

A lot of our doughboys, of course, never came back, their bones interred in graveyards on the other side of "the Pond." They and their English cousins were memorialized in a popular poem that came out of that war:

In Flanders fields the poppies blow
Between the crosses, row on row
That mark our place; and in the sky
The larks, still bravely singing, fly



Written by [Jack Kenny](#) on May 30, 2011

Scarce heard amid the guns below.
We are the Dead. Short days ago
We lived, felt dawn, saw sunset glow,
Loved and were loved, and now we lie
In Flanders Field
Take up our quarrel with the foe:
To you from failing hands we throw
The torch; be yours to hold it high.
If ye break faith with us who die
We shall not sleep, though poppies grow
In Flanders fields.

"To you from failing hands we throw/The torch...." Perhaps that was the inspiration for some of the most stirring words in the [Inaugural Address](#) of America's youthful President, the first born in the 20th Century:

Let the word go forth from the time and place, to friend and foe alike, that the torch has been passed to a new generation of Americans — born in this century, tempered by war, disciplined by a hard and bitter peace, proud of our ancient heritage, and unwilling to witness or permit the slow undoing of those human rights to which this nation has always been committed, and to which we are committed today, both at home and around the world.

That by itself was a rather ambitious call to the defense of freedom, but the President was just getting started. The very next sentence spoke volumes about America's path, once the New Frontiersmen got us "moving again":

Let every nation know, whether it wishes us well or ill, that we shall pay any price, bear any burden, meet any hardship, support any friend, oppose any foe, to assure the survival and the success of liberty.

Well, that pretty much touched all the bases of a far-flung, endless worldwide commitment, doesn't it? Well, not quite. "This much we pledge — and more," Kennedy added.

The lofty rhetoric won nearly universal acclaim. Our allies, naturally, loved it. At home, it was praised by everyone from Eleanor Roosevelt to Barry Goldwater. Goldwater, the party's leading conservative, would become the Republican standard-bearer in 1964 and would be an even more hawkish anti-Communist than either Kennedy or his successor, Lyndon Johnson. But we can only wonder what an earlier conservative and previous "Mr. Republican" might have thought of Kennedy's soaring rhetoric.

"Think of the tremendous power which this proposal gives to the President to involve us in any war throughout the world, including civil wars where we may favor one faction against the other," warned Senator Robert Taft of Ohio in opposing in 1949 the creation of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO). When President Truman sent Americans to war in Korea without any authorization from the Congress of the United States as the Constitution requires, Taft, while no pacifist, warned against the unintended consequences of arming good intentions with tanks, planes, and bombs. "War, undertaken even for justifiable purposes, such as to punish aggression in Korea, has often had the principal results



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of wrecking the country intended to be saved and spreading death and destruction among an innocent civilian population," he said. "Even more than Sherman knew in 1864, 'war is hell.' War should never be undertaken or seriously risked except to protect American Liberty."

Taft was utterly opposed to the idea of sending American forces across either ocean to fight for liberty in the abstract, to become the cannon fodder for the wars and causes of other nations. He believed the armed might of the United States should be employed, if employed it must be, for the defense of the United States and "American liberty." His principles appear to have been in accord with the mind and spirit of John Quincy Adams, who spoke of America as a country that "goes not abroad, in search of monsters to destroy. She is the well-wisher to the freedom and independence of all. She is the champion and vindicator only of her own."

Perhaps when George W. Bush, campaigning for President in 2000, spoke of a more humble role for America in the world, he (or a perceptive speech writer) sensed a desire on the part of the American people to return to the vision of America expressed by John Quincy Adams. That vision is quite at odds with the policy, adopted by *President* Bush, of fighting a worldwide "war on terror" with a "global democratic revolution," advanced by force of arms. The "Bush doctrine" appears to reflect the spirit of Robespierre rather than that of Washington. There is a reason why England's Edmund Burke, whose political thought guided previous generations of American conservatives, preferred America's War for Independence to the French Revolution.

Kennedy's vision of an America that would "support any friend, oppose any foe" is one that had America moving down a road that led our nation into wars in Vietnam, Lao, and Cambodia. It led us to the shedding of blood of our own men at arms and of countless victims in Iraq in order to put the emir back on his throne in Kuwait. It led us into to a war to capture non-existent "weapons of mass destruction" in Iraq and into civil wars in Iraq, Afghanistan, and Libya. It has caused us to forget that even the world's reigning superpower has limits on its ability to prevail in all lands in all regions at all times. "This much we pledge — and more." As Buzz Lightyear put it in the movie *Toy Story*, "To infinity — and beyond!"

"Take up our quarrel with the foe," said the poet. Don't "break faith with us who die." How often we have heard the argument that we have invested too much in an ill-conceived commitment to a war in a far-off land, that too many have already died there for us to pull out now. It is as though the only way to honor their sacrifices and keep faith with the war dead is to make more of them. Increase their numbers. Misery loves company.

Perhaps as we remember the war dead this Memorial Day, we might commit our prayers and any efforts we can make for our country not only to the cause of liberty, but also to the all-important task of guiding our nation to a path of peace. Perhaps we should determine to stay out of those foreign wars and "entangling alliances" that Washington and Jefferson warned against, and employ the force of arms only when it is genuinely a last resort — when war truly is "forced upon us," as our leaders like to say when they are all the while pursuing a war of choice. While decorating the graves of our war dead this Memorial Day, let us resolve to make fewer of them.



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