



Written by [Gary Benoit](#) on May 24, 2009

## Obama, the Soldiers, and Memorial Day

In his weekly Internet and radio address on Saturday, President Barack Obama said that Memorial Day is “a time to reflect on what this holiday is all about; to pay tribute to our fallen heroes; and to remember the servicemen and women who cannot be with us this year because they are standing post far from home — in Iraq, Afghanistan, and around the world.” The president also said that “we have a responsibility to serve all of them as well as they serve all of us,” but that “all too often in recent years and decades, we, as a nation, have failed to live up to that responsibility.”



Obama called this failure “a betrayal of the sacred trust that America has with all who wear — and all who have worn — the proud uniform of our country.” And he added: “That is a sacred trust I am committed to keeping as President of the United States. That is why I will send our servicemen and women into harm’s way only when it is necessary.”

But how is Obama upholding a “sacred trust” by promising that *he* will send our “servicemen and women into harm’s way only when it is necessary.” Beginning with the Korean War, other presidents, both Democrats and Republicans, have also presumed that they possessed the power to go to war and claimed their actions were necessary. That was the case when George W. Bush decided to launch an offensive war against Iraq. Of course, not all agreed with that decision to place our soldiers in harm’s way.

When Barack Obama was sworn in as president, he took an oath to protect and defend the Constitution of the United States. The Constitution delegates to Congress — not the president — the power to declare war. “The constitution supposes, what the History of all governments demonstrates, that the Executive Branch is the branch of power most interested in war, and most prone to it,” James Madison, known as the “Father of the Constitution,” said in an April 2, 1798 letter to Thomas Jefferson. “It has, accordingly, with studied care, vested the question of war in the Legislature.”

Alexander Hamilton, persuasively arguing for ratification of the Constitution in [The Federalist, No. 69](#), noted that under the Constitution the president’s role as commander-in-chief would be very limited:

The President is to be commander-in-chief of the army and navy of the United States. In this respect his authority would be nominally the same with that of the king of Great Britain, but in substance much inferior to it. It would amount to nothing more than the supreme command and direction of the military and naval forces, as first General and admiral ... while that of the British king extends to the declaring of war and to the raising and regulating of fleets and armies — all which, by the Constitution under consideration, would appertain to the legislature.

In order to keep America’s sacred trust with our soldiers, President Obama (and any president for that matter) must first keep his sacred trust with the Constitution, the document that he has sworn to uphold. If he were to do so, he would not presume that the decision to go to war is his.



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President Obama promises in his Memorial weekend Internet and radio address that he “will send our servicemen and women into harm’s way only when it is necessary.” But what does he consider “necessary”? Nation building? Regime change? Meddling in foreign quarrels? Exporting “democracy” at the barrel of a gun? The president’s use of the military thus far — from escalating the conflict in Afghanistan to our growing intervention in Pakistan — suggests that his definition of “necessary” is dangerously expansive.

*Photo: White House*



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