

Memorial Day Speech May 25, 2020

I am here today because I was asked by Larry Wepler of the Harding Township Civic Association to say a few words on what Memorial Day and my service as an Army veteran means to me personally. Thank you for allowing me this honor to speak on such a meaningful occasion. Those who know me understand that my feelings for my military service are extremely strong and that these feelings affect my intersection with civilian society.

I will commence my words with the oath I made upon my commissioning as an Army Second Lieutenant from the University of Illinois Reserve Officers Training Corps in February 1971. This oath crystalized to me the importance of becoming a professional Army officer.

“I, John Mathew Huston, do solemnly swear that I will support and defend the Constitution of the United States against all enemies, foreign and domestic; that I will bear true faith and allegiance to the same; that I take this obligation freely, without any mental reservation or purpose of evasion; and that I will well and faithfully discharge the duties of the office on which I am about to enter. So help me God.

From this solemn oath I took two ideas which became absolute and immutable beliefs ingrained in me as an officer and later as a civilian.

The first idea that struck me was that I was swearing to support and defend a piece of parchment, the Constitution of the United States, and not pledging to support a president, king, religious figure or dictator, nor an institution such as the Army itself, a Congress, Parliament, religion, a political party or a country, even the United States. No, I was swearing to support a document of covenants created by men to define the individual freedoms bestowed upon a new country's citizens by the Bill of Rights and the definition of the boundaries of government's role and its ability to interfere in those rights.

The second idea that deeply affected me was the notion that the Constitution's enemies, would not only be foreign which was to be expected, but also could be domestic. I realized immediately that I had pledged to defend an ideal symbolized by the Constitution from threats arising within our own nation's boundaries.

Reflecting upon America's history makes this idea of a domestic enemy understandable. Our emerging nation first encountered domestic enemies during our first civil war, known as the American Revolution. This war amongst North American British subjects was divided between those who supported the Crown and others who rose in protest against what they perceived as unfair taxes and business restrictions imposed by a distant, uncaring Parliament in which they had no representation to voice their grievances. In the end the revolutionaries prevailed, creating a new independent and sovereign nation.

The second armed domestic conflict was the American Civil War, which finally liberated the people that had remained enslaved after the Revolution and who had not been availed the same rights of others under the Constitution.

It is from this second Civil War that Memorial Day was first observed as “Decoration Day”, a day of remembrance.

After World War I and the wars that followed in the 20th Century, the name for this day gradually changed to Memorial Day to reflect perhaps the need to have our country’s citizenry recall the ultimate sacrifice made by so many men and women who had died while defending our freedoms. The need to remember is even more important as these tragic losses suffered in past battles and wars may not be felt with the same immediacy by succeeding generations and fade with the passage of time.

This fear is best expressed by two poems from World War I.

The first poem “In Flanders Fields” was written by a Canadian Army Doctor, John McCrae in 1915 after the death from artillery fire of a close friend, Lieutenant Alexis Helmer. These words express his hopes that these losses were not meaningless, as I now recite.

**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
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 fields.**

**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.**

Three years later in November 1918 as World War I was ending, an American war volunteer, Moina Michael, moved by McCrae's poem, wrote this poem in response, entitled "We Shall Keep the Faith".

**Oh! you who sleep in Flanders Fields,
Sleep sweet – to rise anew!
We caught the torch you threw
And holding high, we keep the Faith
With All who died.**

**We cherish, too, the Poppy red
That grows on fields where valor led;
It seems to signal to the skies
That blood of heroes never dies,
But lends a lustre to the red
Of the flower that blooms above the dead**

In Flanders Fields.

And now the Torch and Poppy Red

We wear in honor of our dead.

Fear not that ye have died for naught;

We'll teach the lesson that ye wrought

In Flanders Fields.

Today, we must accept the challenge to continue to carry that Torch and to remember our fallen and those who made the last full measure of devotion in defending freedom. We must also remember what they were defending, what they were fighting for. Finally, we all must pledge to reacquaint ourselves with our Country's founding history and the true meaning of our Constitution and the freedoms which it permits each and every one of us to enjoy.

So in closing, I reaffirm my Army officer's oath to support and defend the United States Constitution by saying "So help me God."

Thank you.