

Memorial Day, 1868-1990

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Since its inception as an official American holiday in May 1868, Memorial Day has lost most of its original meaning. The original purpose of the day, to mourn the soldiers and sailors who lost their lives in the American Civil War (1861-65) and console the widows and children they left behind, has gradually given way to celebrations and events that often have little or nothing to do with early Memorial Day commemorations. Coverage of the holiday in the major American media (the *New York Times* for the purposes of this paper) during the decades immediately following the Civil War reveals that ceremonies consistently focussed on the original motivations associated with the holiday. However, by the late 1880's, the day's connection to the Civil War dead was becoming less clear, and instead celebrations, sporting events, family outings, and retail and real estate discount advertisements began to overshadow sentiments originally associated with Memorial Day ceremonies. The memory of the Civil War dead, and those of America's subsequent wars, have been invoked primarily during Memorial Days in periods of war and crisis, utilised by government and military officials to instil a sense of unity, patriotism, and duty into the general populace. At the same time, the sacrificial meaning attached to wartime Memorial Day celebrations declined throughout the twentieth century, and particularly during the Vietnam conflict, when the American public disagreed violently about the purpose of American involvement in the conflict and the value of American lives lost there. Contemporary Memorial Day observations suffer from low veteran and public turnout. For most, the holiday is no longer spent respectfully viewing columns of veterans parading down city streets, visiting the local cemetery with flowers and wreaths in hand, or listening to a preacher pray for those who lost their lives in America's wars. Today the average American uses the day for personal purposes - whether that be to take in a baseball game or the Indy 500, or to visit the beach or Memorial Day white sales - while little time is devoted to the observances as originally conceived by the founders of the holiday.

The first officially sanctioned Memorial Day, then called Decoration Day, was held on 30 May 1868. According to General Order no.11 issued by General John A. Logan, first commander

of the Grand Army of the Republic (GAR), the day was set apart for the purpose of

strewing with flowers, or otherwise decorating the graves of comrades who died in defence of their country during the late rebellion, and whose bodies now lie in almost every city, village and hamlet church-yard in the land. Let us, at the time appointed, gather around their sacred remains and garland the passionate mounds above them with choicest flowers of springtime; let us raise above them the dear old flag they saved from dishonor; let us, in this solemn presence, renew our pledges to aid and assist those they have left among us as a sacred charge upon a nation's gratitude, the soldiers' and sailors' widow and orphan.¹

The earliest ceremonies included parades and marches of memorial groups and military organisations. Upon reaching the local cemetery, a minister would offer an invocation, followed by a hymn or a poem. Next the main speaker, usually a military man associated with the G.A.R., would address the assembled crowds followed by a benediction; an infantry or artillery salute would mark the end of the official ceremony. The first ceremony at Post Sedgwick in New York included 'a coffin, draped with an American ensign, laid in front of the platform, symbolizing a departed hero, and the noble and tattered banners of the Tenth, Eighty-Second and Eighty-Eighth New York regiments drooped over it with calm pride'.² At this ceremony, the reading of former President Lincoln's famed Gettysburg address marked the end of the official ceremony.³ One aspect of the day remained constant in these early years: the cleaning and decorating of the graves of dead soldiers by local women and children, often the relatives of men who died in the war. With the Civil War fresh in the minds of all citizens, these earliest ceremonies focussed on mourning the death of so many soldiers, and the consolation of those still grieving the loss of loved ones. Sentiments of reconciliation were not yet widespread, as many northerners expressed anger at the suggestion made by some people that Memorial Day ceremonies may 'couple those who died for the Union with those who fought to strangle it'.⁴

These sentiments would, for the most part, be reflected in Memorial Day services in the north for the next twenty years. Ceremonies in the 1870's and 1880's also emphasised American

¹ 'Our Dead Heroes,' *New York Times*, 31 May 1868, p. 8.

² 'Grand Army of the Republic,' *New York Times*, 30 May 1868, p. 8.

³ 'Grand Army of the Republic,' *New York Times*, 30 May 1868, p. 8.

⁴ 'Our Dead Heroes,' *New York Times*, 31 May 1868, p. 8.

exceptionalism and superiority. Commenting on Memorial Day observances in 1878, General William Tecumseh Sherman stated:

Custom can never stale the name of Marathon, and the mound which still is heaped above the dead on that antique plain cannot be more clean and honorable to mankind than the grassy hillocks which inclose all that is mortal of the heroes who laid down their lives that America, greater than Greece, might endure forever.⁵

The general, as would be expected, emphasised the important legacy left behind by the Civil War dead he commanded, and appealed to the American people ‘to preserve what they died to save’.⁶ Many speeches expressed sentiments of sacrifice, as can be seen in the comments of Vice Admiral David Dixon Porter:

Nothing is more touching and beautiful than to see a nation testifying its grief over the graves of those who have died that their country might live, and who, in giving their lives as a sacrifice on the alter of loyalty, have insured the blessings of freedom on millions yet unborn, who will reverence in future ages the memory of the martyrs of so noble a cause.⁷

While speakers cautiously promoted reconciliation between the north and the south, reminders of why the war had been fought usually accompanied their appeals. Reconstruction-era Governor of South Carolina Daniel Henry Chamberlain stressed that while Memorial Day should not promote feelings of hatred or hostility between the former foes, efforts toward reconciliation should be tempered with the recognition that ‘we must pronounce secession and slavery wrong, if we would duly honor the memory of the martyrs of the Union and freedom.’⁸

By 1888, the Memorial Day tradition of mourning and consolation was beginning to give way to one of celebration. Some officials objected to the emergence of a ‘disposition in some quarters to take the day for holiday uses, and to devote it to sports and pastimes, incongruous with the serious associations of the anniversary’.⁹ For example, according to the *New York Times*

⁵ ‘Decoration Day Services,’ *New York Times*, 30 May 1878, p. 5.

⁶ ‘Decoration Day Services,’ *New York Times*, 30 May 1878, p. 5.

⁷ ‘Decoration Day Services,’ *New York Times*, 30 May 1878, p. 5.

⁸ ‘Decoration Day Services,’ *New York Times*, 30 May 1878, p. 5.

⁹ John Pettegrew, “‘The Soldier’s Faith’: Turn-of-the-Century Memory of the Civil War and the Emergence of

local baseball games broke several attendance records on Memorial Day in 1888.¹⁰ The ceremonies themselves changed little during this period, and the public continued for the most part to pay their respects to the Civil War dead by attending the parades and speeches at local cemeteries in large numbers. However, the emphasis on celebration rather than mourning and consolation is evident in official Memorial Day speeches of the time. At the Metropolitan Opera House, Mr. Chauncey M. Depew stated in his speech that ‘nearly one-quarter of a century has passed since the war. The time has passed for grief in the glorious compensations which grant to us the enjoyments of life.’ The pangs of grief ‘are assuaged by the recollections of the glorious deeds of those who are gone’, and we are hear to meet in ‘joyful celebration of magnificent recollections and the triumph of ideas which came out of the victories of war.’¹¹ Later that same evening, a Colonel Ingersoll gave a speech which offered hope for reconciliation. Following Depew’s assertion that ‘we recall nothing which arouses vindictiveness or sectional passion,’ Ingersoll declared:

Together we reap the fruits of the great victory. We are all conquerors. Around the graves of the heroes - North and South, white and collared - together we stand, and with uncovered heads reverently thank the saviours of our native land.¹²

Speculating on America’s future, Ingersoll envisioned a land at peace, without beggars and heartless misers, and without disease of flesh or mind.¹³ The colonel seemed to be expressing hope while at the same time issuing a warning. If the social ills of society are not remedied, Ingersoll implies, America could once again fall victim to internal conflict.

Memorial Day celebrations during the Spanish-American War of 1898 revealed how veterans, government officials, and others used the holiday to instil in the population a new sense of unity, patriotism, and duty to the state. The G.A.R. parade and other Memorial Day events in 1898 were some of the most spectacular and memorable in the history of the holiday, coming as

Modern American Nationalism,’ *Journal of Contemporary History*, v. 31 (1996), p. 50.

¹⁰ *New York Times*, 31 May 1888, p. 3.

¹¹ ‘Only Eulogy was Heard,’ *New York Times*, 31 May 1888, p. 1.

¹² ‘Only Eulogy was Heard,’ *New York Times*, 31 May 1888, p. 1-2.

¹³ ‘Only Eulogy was Heard,’ *New York Times*, 31 May 1888, p. 2.

they did at a time when the country was excited about military affairs. Interest in the holiday and in the events it commemorated were ‘quickened by the existing state of war and the departure of thousands of New York troops for the south on their way to future battlefields.’¹⁴ While many more people now used the holiday for personal and recreational purposes, as witnessed in advertisements for baseball games, golf tournaments, horse races, yachting and rowing excursions, and lacrosse and polo matches, in the “Memorial Day Events” section of the *New York Times*, the day also included renewed acts of commemoration. Many new statues were unveiled, including ones dedicated to Presidents Washington and Lincoln. Most visibly, however, Memorial Day celebrations linked traditional commemoration of the Civil War dead with the ongoing conflict with Spain. The ceremony at Carnegie Hall served this dual purpose, by ‘giving praise to the heroic dead of the Union and their comrades still living ... and cheering on the men now in the field in America’s crusade for Cuban freedom’.¹⁵ The Reverend Clark Wright declared that the Spanish-American War served to reconcile the two sides of the Civil War.¹⁶ At the same event, General Shaw, the former Department Commander of Watertown, New York, expressed similar sentiments of American unity, and went further in linking the Civil War with the ongoing Spanish-American conflict:

Another bloody sacrifice is before the Nation. Again the voice of duty is the voice of God; and now with one heart, one purpose, and one American sentiment of patriotism our Army and Navy face the foes of liberty, resolute, resistless, ready and anxious to uphold the honor of the country and fight for the freedom of Cuba.¹⁷

At Arlington Cemetery in Washington, D.C., Senator John M. Thurston of Nebraska emphasised that a new national unity was expressed by the soldiers and sailors serving their country in the ongoing war:

What an inspiring sight to see those who fought against each other now rallying under one flag, exalting and rejoicing that the azure field of the Union banner

¹⁴ ‘Events of Memorial Day,’ *New York Times*, 30 May 1898, p. 10.

¹⁵ ‘GAR Memorial Service,’ *New York Times*, 31 May 1898, p. 4.

¹⁶ ‘GAR Memorial Service,’ *New York Times*, 31 May 1898, p. 4.

¹⁷ ‘GAR Memorial Service,’ *New York Times*, 31 May 1898, p. 4.

holds in equal honor every star of Statehood ... We are united as never before. Every trace of bitterness is gone at last.¹⁸

In this period, American military ventures were increasingly associated with what has been termed “martial heroism”. As Richard Hofstadter has explained, the liberation of oppressed peoples provided a heroic justification for waging war: the Spanish-American War ‘served as an outlet for expressing aggressive impulses while presenting itself ... as an idealistic and humanitarian crusade.’¹⁹ The address by Assistant Secretary of the Interior Webster Davis at the Memorial Day ceremony at Gettysburg in 1898 reflected this emerging association of altruism and American military ventures:

The Christian nations of the Old World lost the great and golden opportunity of the century when they turned a deaf ear to the pleadings of the downtrodden and oppressed people of Greece and Armenia. But the young republic of the New World has heard the cry from the suffering and oppressed people of an island at its very door and has hastened to its relief.²⁰

The twentieth century witnessed a gradual decline in attendance at Memorial Day parades and ceremonies, while the events themselves increasingly bore little resemblance to the observance as it was originally conceived. When the holiday did experience a revival, particularly during the two world wars, it hardly resembled Memorial Days of earlier periods. Instead, government officials used the holiday for contemporary purposes, whether it be to salute the soldiers overseas or to foster public support for the war effort.

The 1908 Memorial Day parades in New York not only included Civil War veterans, but also Spanish-American War veterans, regulars from the armed forces of the day, and city police officers. Rain drove the already sparse crowds away, and also cut short the speech of Governor Charles E. Hughes. To the great disappointment of Grant’s relatives, aged members of the G.A.R., and the U.S. Grant Association, Secretary of War William H. Taft’s speech at Grant’s Tomb focussed on the generals’ “squalid beginnings”, his failed business ventures, his

¹⁸ ‘President at Arlington,’ *New York Times*, 31 May 1898, p. 5.

¹⁹ Pettegrew, “‘The Soldier’s Faith’: Turn-of-the-Century Memory of the Civil War and the Emergence of Modern American Nationalism,” p. 62.

²⁰ ‘Exercises at Gettysburg,’ *New York Times*, 31 May 1898, p. 5.

alcoholism, and his non-military character, with little reference to his Civil War record.²¹ The contemporary meaning of the day for American citizens, according to the editors of the *New York Times*, was the defence of the Union against socialists who were dedicated to its destruction.²² Meanwhile, reference to the memory of the Civil War and Spanish-American War dead was largely overshadowed by sections on “Sports for Memorial Day”, and advertisements for ‘Decoration Day’ real estate offerings and retail sales.

Memorial Day observances in 1918, on the other hand, honoured the soldiers and sailors lost during the preceding year, the first year American servicemen fought in battle in the First World War. The day was memorable, according to the *New York Times*, ‘as well as pathetic, because of the greatly thinned ranks of old Civil War veterans.’²³ The sermon performed by Bishop Patrick J. Hughes at the open-air mass at Battery Park included an appeal for national unity in the ongoing war.²⁴ Similarly, the Civil War veterans who spoke at the memorial ceremony at Grant’s Tomb ‘made it plain that their thoughts were not of the sixties, but of the boys now on sea and in the trenches beyond the Atlantic.’ Everywhere it seemed the deeds of the G.A.R. were linked with those of the American soldiers fighting in Europe. In his speech to the G.A.R. veterans, New York Governor Whitman declared:

As we look at you veterans of the Grand Army we realize that all we are fighting for over there, and for the winning of which we are sending our sons and brothers across the seas, is due to the struggle once waged by you and your comrades, for we would not have the things we are fighting for today had it not been for you.²⁵

With peace came a general decline in the observance of Memorial Day. Citizens expressed their concern in letters to the editor of the *New York Times*, lamenting that while the “war to end all wars” ended only ten years earlier, the American people seemed to have ‘forgotten so soon the devastation, suffering, death, and those living in worse than death, for whom the war will

²¹ ‘Over Grant’s Body Tells His Weakness,’ *New York Times*, 31 May 1908, p. 14.

²² ‘The Meaning of the Day,’ *New York Times*, 30 May 1908, p. 6.

²³ ‘Our Allies Join in Memorial Parade,’ *New York Times*, 31 May 1918, p. 4.

²⁴ ‘Our Allies Join in Memorial Parade,’ *New York Times*, 31 May 1918, p. 4.

²⁵ ‘Our Allies Join in Memorial Parade,’ *New York Times*, 31 May 1918, p. 4.

never be over.’²⁶ Attendance at Memorial Day ceremonies in New York and around the country declined throughout the 1920’s and early 1930’s, to the dismay of the few remaining Civil War veterans, as well as those of subsequent wars. However, the uncertainty characteristic of the mid to late 1930’s, and later America’s participation in the Second World War, served to revitalize the observance of the day, though not in its original form.

In line with sentiments of isolation prominent in 1930’s America, Memorial Day ceremonies in 1938 served as warnings against the country recklessly involving itself in foreign wars. At Prospect Park in Brooklyn, Attorney-General John J. Bennett urged his listeners to ‘resist influences that might lead this country into war’.²⁷ New York Senator Robert F. Wagner, commenting on the retreat of democracy in the face of authoritarianism in many parts of the world, called on America to avoid intervening directly in the affairs of foreign nations, and rather to ‘take its place as the refuge of the oppressed, but, more than that, for its people to rededicate themselves to traditional American principles of malice toward none, charity for all, that this country shall be the sanctuary of democracy for the ages to come.’²⁸

Following America’s entry into the Second World War, Memorial Day ceremonies began to resemble those of the late First World War period. Memorial Day in 1944 was celebrated not as it was originally intended, rather, politicians and others used the observance to instil a sense of national unity, patriotism, and duty in the populace. The men and boys fighting in Europe and the Pacific, according to a *New York Times* editorial, were ‘one with the men and boys who fell on Bunker Hill, on both sides of the stone wall at Gettysburg and in the Argonne Forest.’²⁹ Unlike the First World War, however, America celebrated several Memorial Day’s during the Second World War while its soldiers fought and died in foreign lands. More than on any previous Memorial Day, the ceremonies in 1944 focussed on the soldiers and sailors killed in the current war.³⁰ However, while hundreds of thousands of spectators witnessed the parades and

²⁶ ‘One Fitting Memorial,’ *New York Times*, 29 May 1928, p. 24.

²⁷ ‘Nation Will Honor War Heroes Today,’ *New York Times*, 30 May 1938, p. 1.

²⁸ ‘Nation Will Honor War Heroes Today,’ *New York Times*, 30 May 1938, p. 26.

²⁹ ‘For the Living, Too,’ *New York Times*, 30 May 1944, p. 20.

³⁰ ‘North, South Clasp Stirrs Gettysburg,’ *New York Times*, 31 May 1944, p. 10.

ceremonies throughout New York that year, many also discovered the joy of spending the holiday at home, ‘working at an accumulation of odd jobs, and the throngs that did get away traveled only short distances to resorts and beaches.’³¹ It was estimated that one and a half million people visited the Rockaways, seven hundred thousand visited the beaches, boardwalks and amusements at Coney Island, and one hundred thousand visited Ashbury Park and Atlantic City on Memorial Day in 1944.³²

Since the close of the Second World War, in times of war and peace, the average American citizen has used Memorial Day for recreational rather than commemorative purposes. The sacrificial meaning attached to the death of American soldiers in the Civil War, the Spanish-American War, and the two world wars was less easily applied to later conflicts, the Vietnam War in particular. In 1961, the one hundredth anniversary of the beginning of the Civil War, the *New York Times* lamented that Memorial Day had become ‘a rather formalized sort of day,’³³ and in 1971, *New York Times* columnist James Reston wrote that;

Memorial Day is supposed to be a time of remembrance for the American’s who died in our nine major wars ... Modern man is not very good at remembering. He is obviously and naturally more interested in himself and his own time. This is particularly true of the Americans, who have feeble memories.³⁴

According to Catherine Albanese, the death of veterans of America’s major wars contributed to the declining observance of the day as it was originally intended. She also regards the lack of enthusiasm surrounding post-Second World War Memorial Day celebrations as the product of the development in the United States of ‘a social system which with growing completeness puts its premium on the ego-centred individual while conceiving group boundaries as fluid and unconfining.’³⁵ In other words, as Americans gained greater control over their lives due to the

³¹ ‘Memorial Day Travel Light Here As Many Spend Holiday At Home,’ *New York Times*, 31 May 1944, p. 1, 21.

³² ‘Memorial Day Travel Light Here As Many Spend Holiday At Home,’ *New York Times*, 31 May 1944, p. 1, 21.

³³ Catherine Albanese, ‘Requiem for Memorial Day: Dissent in the Redeemer Nation,’ *American Quarterly*, v. 26, no. 4, p. 387-388.

³⁴ ‘Memorial Day, 1971,’ *New York Times*, 30 May 1971, sec. 4, p. 13.

³⁵ Albanese, ‘Requiem for Memorial Day: Dissent in the Redeemer Nation,’ p. 395.

weakening of the state, they preferred spending the Memorial Day holiday engaged in enjoyable activities rather than watching sombre parades of veterans and listening to eulogies for America's war dead.

Coverage of Memorial Day in the *New York Times* in the post-Second World War period focussed on weather forecasts, traffic reports, and recreational events, often with little or no reference to America's war dead and veterans. In 1958, the Memorial Day issue of the *Times* described the day as the traditional start of the summer vacation season, as 'thousands of motorists were bound for beaches, country camping sites, and summer homes and cottages.' According to the National Safety Council, more than forty million vehicles would travel ten billion miles during the holiday weekend in 1958.³⁶ The limited references made to Memorial Day parades and ceremonies revealed that both veterans and the general public seldom attended the events. President Eisenhower hosted veteran groups at the White House in 1958, but he mentioned little of their sacrifices or the ultimate price paid by their fallen comrades, and instead used the occasion to justify high military spending and the value of deterrence:

We must have in our military forces real unification of purpose, real unification of organization and of direction. Our military strength, costly though it may be, is one of the rocks today on which we must rest our hope for peace. No weakness must be allowed to appear in the American shield, whether it be spiritual, whether it be economic, or whether it be military.³⁷

In 1968, the one-hundredth anniversary of the Memorial Day holiday, advertisements for clothing and other retail sales dominated the pages of the *New York Times*. In the article "Many Will Honor Dead Today", the anticipation of hundreds of holiday weekend automobile accident-related deaths overshadowed the already scarce mention of the day as one of remembrance. According to the piece, not everyone would be observing the holiday by remembering America's war dead; on the contrary, 'ball parks and race tracks expect record crowds, and a massive departure of city dwellers to the country, mountains and beaches is also anticipated.'³⁸ The controversy over the recently instituted federal Memorial Day celebration to be observed on the

³⁶ 'Thongs Leaving City For Holiday,' *New York Times*, 30 May 1958, p. 1.

³⁷ 'President Greets Nation's Heroes,' *New York Times*, 31 May 1958, p. 1.

³⁸ 'Many Will Honor War Dead Today,' *New York Times*, 30 May 1968, p. 20.

last Monday of every May, and its frequent conflict with the New York State observances held annually on 30 May, dominated the *Times* coverage of the holiday in 1978.³⁹ The mere two paragraphs dedicated to describing the holiday as a commemoration of America's veterans and war dead were followed directly by a description of the exploits of one thousand skinny-dippers who 'jammed Black's Beach ... to observe the fourth anniversary of the granting of "swimsuit optional" status to the beach.'⁴⁰ The largest and most elaborate Memorial Day parade route in New York traversing Riverside Drive was cut short in 1978 due to a shortage of onlookers and veterans.⁴¹ Meanwhile, Atlantic City casinos attributed their record crowds and revenues to the Memorial Day weekend rush.⁴²

Many veterans increasingly chose to grieve in private, avoiding official Memorial Day ceremonies. Len Schwende, a Vietnam War veteran, preferred meeting privately with other veterans in 1988, stating that it meant more to him than any parade could.⁴³ But even these private gatherings attracted few veterans, a trend further reflected in Memorial Day parades and ceremonies throughout New York in 1988. Because 'most people treated Memorial Day as part of a long holiday weekend,' fewer than two thousand spectators watched a mere one hundred American Legion veterans parade in the Upper West Side of the city, a parade which in the 1940's and 1950's attracted crowds of several hundred thousand people.⁴⁴ The veterans who participated regularly in the parades lamented the apparent lack of public support. Dirck Vreeland, a Second World War veteran, felt that it was unfortunate that Memorial Day had been commercialized. He went on to say that 'there's a lack of remembrance and a lack of thinking about this country and it would do a lot of people good to think about it.'⁴⁵ His sentiments were

³⁹ 'Many of Holidayless New Yorkers Made Yesterday Day Off Anyway,' *New York Times*, 30 May 1978, p. 1.

⁴⁰ 'Many of Holidayless New Yorkers Made Yesterday Day Off Anyway,' *New York Times*, 30 May 1978, p. B8.

⁴¹ 'A Day of Parades Amid Confusion,' *New York Times*, 31 May 1978, p. 1.

⁴² 'Atlantic City Casino Calls Crowd A Record,' *New York Times*, 31 May 1978, p. B2.

⁴³ 'On Memorial Day, Grieving In Private,' *New York Times*, 31 May 1988, p. B2.

⁴⁴ 'On Memorial Day, Grieving In Private,' *New York Times*, 31 May 1988, p. B2.

⁴⁵ 'On Memorial Day, Grieving In Private,' *New York Times*, 31 May 1988, p. B2. See also Christopher Wren, 'Gone, and Mostly Forgotten, Veterans Lament,' *New York Times*, 1 June 1999, and Shaila Dewan, 'In Brooklyn,

certainly reflected in 1991, only shortly after the end of the U.S.-led war against Iraq, as no significant reference was made to Memorial Day in the 30 May issue of the *New York Times*. Throughout the 1990's and into the early twenty-first century, the sentiments expressed by Mr. Vreeland were echoed by scores of veterans disheartened by the ever-shrinking crowds out to pay tribute on Memorial Day.

Memorial Day, as it was originally conceived, no longer exists. By the late 1880's, the holiday was already undergoing a transformation from a day of mourning and consolation to one of celebration and leisure. The memory of America's war dead has been invoked by politicians and others in times of national crisis, particularly during the two world wars; however, these infrequent and brief renaissances sought to instil a sense of unity, patriotism and duty into the populace, rather than to honour those who fought and died in America's major wars. Throughout the twentieth and early twenty-first centuries, the more formal aspects of Memorial Day ceremonies have lost much of their earlier appeal. This is partially explained by the fact that as time passed, and as fewer citizens joined the armed forces and fewer still died in combat, Americans were less likely to have connections to soldiers and sailors who died in America's major wars, to veterans who survived the wars, or even to men and women in the armed forces of the day. In addition, the declining influence of the state in the private lives of individuals, and the decision by the U.S. government to make the last Monday of every May a national Memorial Day observance, combined to give people a long weekend at the start of the summer season and the freedom to decide what to do with it. As the twentieth century progressed, Americans increasingly took advantage of the early summer holiday, using it for more enjoyable and leisurely personal purposes, resulting in dismal crowds at Memorial Day parades and ceremonies honouring America's fallen heroes.

Memories and a Thin Line of Spectators,' *New York Times*, 29 May 2001, at www.nytimes.com, for comments by veterans on the lack of public support for Memorial Day commemorations.