

Veterans Day is for reflection, honor, respect

In 1921, an unknown World War I American soldier was buried in Arlington National Cemetery. This site, on a hillside overlooking the Potomac River and the city of Washington, D.C., became the focal point of reverence for America's veterans.

Similar ceremonies occurred earlier in England and France, where an unknown soldier was buried in each nation's highest place of honor (Westminster Abbey in England and the Arc de Triomphe in France). These memorial gestures all took place on Nov. 11, giving universal recognition to the celebrated ending of World War I fighting at 11 a.m., Nov. 11, 1918. This day became known as "Armistice Day."

Armistice Day became a national holiday in 1938. If the idealistic hope had been realized that World War I was "the war to end all wars," Nov. 11 might still be called Armistice Day. But soon after the holiday was proclaimed, war broke out in Europe. Sixteen and one-half million Americans took part — 407,000 of them died in service, more than 290,000 in battle.

Representative Edwin K. Rees of Kansas proposed to pay tribute to those who had served in World War II by changing the name of the Nov. 11 holiday from Armistice Day to Veterans Day, and making it an occasion to honor those who have served America in all wars. In 1954, President Eisenhower signed a bill proclaiming Nov. 11 as Veterans Day.

As I reflect on the service of veterans before me, I am also very aware of the fact that there will be many more veterans to come. We concluded long ago that the "war to end all wars" was not World War I, and we do not know whether the last war is near; but we do know that those who serve play a vital role in assuring our freedom.

We have seen over the past few weeks what great pain evil brings to the world, and we also recognize the soothing balm that good brings. Today we have seen a different type of war, one that has taken us out of our comfort zones and placed us in the midst of the battlefield, our own back yards.

We have seen the sacrifice of life by a different type of veteran. Having been touched so closely, it allows us to feel more deeply the spirit of this country: the spirit that believes in liberty and justice for all; the spirit of courage and peace. This is the spirit the veteran has always known, and it is my hope that, as we pay tribute to our veterans, that we understand the sacrifice, love and courage of those who served and continue to serve our country.

Someone once said that the hope of the heart is a promise. Just as a child's security depends on the parent's promise to keep him or her safe, countries remain safe when neighbors keep their promises to honor their borders. The veteran has promised to protect what all in this country hold dear to their hearts. Veterans served to preserve our way of life, our freedoms for this day and the future. Let this Veterans Day be a day of reflection, honor and respect. ♦



Commentary
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