

Letter from the Editor – About the sacrifice

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Prince Frederick, MD - Every Memorial Day we hear the familiar rants—at least three of them. One, it's a day to honor the dead, not salute veterans, that's Veterans' Day. Two, it's not about sales, cookouts and pool parties. And three, saying "happy Memorial Day" is not appropriate because it's a day of sadness. I have an additional peeve to add to the list. It involves a cliché I honestly find slightly grating. Let me apologize in advance if you find that opinion offensive. Several times this weekend we will hear somebody utter the phrase "ultimate sacrifice." I suppose what I find trite about that is we never really contemplate the true breadth of or the motivation for the sacrifice. The sacrifice shouldn't be marginalized. This Memorial Day weekend I offer some thoughts on that.

To understand what has been lost in battles on the land, air and sea, consider the lives of those who survived their experience in harm's way. After World War II, for example, soldiers and sailors returned home and many then resumed their lives as civilians. Most got married and started families. Some of the families became quite large. Quite a few of us were members of those families and we owe our very existence to the fact that our fathers came home. The same is true for the children of Korean and Vietnam war veterans. There are also a large number of sons and daughters of soldiers, sailors, Marines and flyers who were conceived and/or born before their fathers went off to fight and then didn't return home. The appropriate bonding of a father and children was lost to the war. This sad occurrence continues today with ongoing conflicts in the Middle East.

The returnees also sought and obtained higher education—the G.I. Bill remains one of America's best hand-ups ever devised. They embarked on careers, purchased homes, automobiles, took their families on vacations and filled positions of local, state and national leadership. Some became doctors—treating patients of all ages for a variety of maladies or found cures, treatments or ways to lower risks for more serious illnesses. Their contributions to our magnificent quality of life are significant. Bear in mind, not all of the returnees made the most of their opportunities. Our society is filled with war veterans who became alcoholics and drug addicts, committed heinous crimes and became estranged from their families. But the opportunity to succeed or fail was there.

America is fortunate that so many war veterans have returned to apply their talents and skills, plus share their knowledge, wit and wisdom with our society. Yet how often do we wonder just how much better off we could be if the warriors lost in war had instead survived. How many potentially great doctors, statesmen and parents lay in burial sites all around the world—their promise forever unfulfilled?

Consider this as well. In most of our 20th century wars the U.S. had a draft. Not all of the servicemen went willingly. When it comes to war, reluctance is not a character flaw. For them service in the Armed Forces was a demand to 'pay it forward' for being a citizen. A large number got a return on that payment—a significant number did not.

It's appropriate that we thank members of the military for their vigilance and protection. We also shouldn't forget those whose job it is to maintain peace behind the scenes. The ranks of America's diplomacy force also deserve our appreciation for trying to avert conflict and save lives.

It's also appropriate, especially this weekend, to remember the war dead of each and every conflict. Lamenting their lost potential seems appropriate, too.

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