

We remember Memorial Day

Curtis Seltzer

BLUE GRASS, Va.—Memorial Day, 2012. A federal holiday that was officially named in 1967. A three-day weekend. The unofficial start of summer. Burgers and baseball and beer.

The first reported honoring of American war dead seems to have occurred in Charleston, SC on May 1, 1865 when newly freed slaves organized a ceremony on behalf of 257 Union prisoners who had died in captivity and been buried in a mass grave. An estimated 10,000 freedmen, Union troops and a few whites gathered to dedicate their reburial in individual graves in what is today, Hampton Park.

Commemorations of Civil War dead were organized locally in a growing number of communities in the late 1860s. North and South tended to honor their soldiers separately for years. These ceremonies merged, particularly after WW I.

Known then as “Decoration Day,” it was renamed Memorial Day in 1967, set for the last Monday in May and made a three-day federal holiday in 1971.

On Monday, we will set aside time to remember and thank those who served in the wars within our own memories.

For the last 100 years or so, America has fought big wars and small without seeking or taking land as the spoils of victory. (The two main exceptions were the Panama Canal Zone and the Philippines, which was granted independence in 1946.)

Our lack of territorial acquisitiveness is remarkable, historically. Other great powers always sought to expand their land base through occupation and colonization.

Instead of taking possession of other lands, we exerted influence through financial, political and military means. We currently maintain between about 500 and 1,100 military bases in some 38 countries, though the exact number does not appear to be known to anyone and is further confused by lack of agreement on definition.

In 2010, the Pentagon reported that 13 countries hosted U.S. military installations exceeding 1,000 persons—Belgium, Germany, Italy, Spain, Turkey, United Kingdom, Japan, Bahrain, Djibouti, South Korea, Iraq, Afghanistan and Kuwait.

Found on foreign soil are some 52,000 buildings, 39,000 heavy infrastructure facilities like storage tanks and piers, and 9,100 “linear structures” like runways and pipelines. Our cost for building and maintaining these bases is about \$50 billion a year, but no one seems exactly sure.

All other countries together have a small handful of such facilities. No other dominant power in history has ever organized a global military presence in this fashion.

We live in a time where the world’s major powers are more or less settled on what’s theirs and what isn’t. Exceptions exist—China with Taiwan and Tibet; Russia -- now half the size of the former Soviet Union -- with unresolved claims in central Asia.

The other former imperial powers -- Britain, France, Germany, Austria, Japan, Netherlands, Belgium, Italy, Turkey, Portugal and Spain -- have almost entirely retreated within their traditional borders. They no longer seek to acquire, own or occupy additional land.

The American network of bases projects our presence beyond our borders, enables us to influence events, makes providing humanitarian assistance faster and easier and provides us with platforms to intervene militarily when that is deemed necessary.

Bases may or may not lead to interventions that would not have occurred in their absence, but, in any case, they do facilitate them.

Big interventions -- wars, in all but name and Congressional declaration -- are less likely in the future. I don’t think we will see again an ideological intervention like Vietnam, a regime-change invasion like Iraq or a nation-building exercise in a near-permanently failed state like Afghanistan.

These war-interventions rarely seem to work out. Occupation, we’ve learned, engenders opposition, protracted stalemate and chronic instability.

Apart from whether big interventions achieve their goals, they are hideously expensive, and getting more so as technology is substituted for soldiers. Stephen Daggett of the Congressional Research Service estimated the cost of American wars and interventions since 1945 in constant FY 2011 dollars, excluding the cost of veteran benefits, interest payments on war debts and aid to allies:

	<u>Dollar Cost</u>	<u>Dead</u>	<u>Wounded</u>
WW II	\$4,104 billion	405,399	670,846
Korea	341 billion	36,516	92,134

Vietnam	738 billion	58,209	153,303
Persian Gulf	102 billion	258	849
Iraq	784 billion	4,477	31,965
Afghanistan/Other	321 billion	1,803*	9,971

The most recent U.S. fatality number is 1,980 for 2001-2012, and a total of 3,008 for all coalition forces in Afghanistan.

Small interventions with limited objectives using elite forces, missiles and drones are likely to be the pattern going forward. The big regime-changing, nation-building, open-ended interventions are too costly to replicate and too unpredictable in their results.

Future U.S. military interventions are likely to be concentrated in small, poor countries where they will have large impacts with relatively few Americans on the ground for very long. Meddling on the cheap will be a temptation, but the U.S. seems wary of doing much of it.

For the last 20 years, we've engaged in very few of the small-country meddlings and dictator-proppings that were so common in the 50s through 80s. No more Bay of Pigs, undercover coups, clandestine wars and destabilization efforts. The long-term consequences of such interventions rarely turned out in our favor.

The mainstream current of our foreign policy seems to be running in the direction of letting small countries sort things out themselves, even where the outcome is not likely to be what we want most. But one policy size does not fit all circumstances. We stopped the Serbs, but not the craziness in Rwanda. When the Arab Spring popped up, we helped the Libyan rebels from a distance, but didn't do much of anything in Syria—a harder nut to crack.

For the last 60 years, big powers have stopped fighting wars with each other, the last example being Korea. Now, they bump each other around on the fields of trade, finance, politics and rhetoric. Perhaps the globalization of their economies has put an end to the soldier-intensive, fight-to-the-death wars among them that marked the 20th Century. The chance of nuclear war between the big powers seems to have ended with the 1962 Cuban missile crisis.

America has often been a force for global stability and humanitarian assistance since WW II. In the same period, we've also read conflict situations incorrectly, intervened for the wrong reasons, caused irreparable harm and put our military into situations that were essentially internal wars where our goals were fuzzy and our means not up to the job.

U.S. military leaders today are wary about being deployed in ambiguous circumstances with vague objectives and uncertain support. Politicians talk big, but it's G.I. Joe and G.I. Jane who have to walk it out. We are much more protective of our soldiers' lives than before.

The mantra of Colin Powell seems to be the operating standard: intervene only where there is a clear and compelling national interest that Americans understand and support; make sure that the goal can be accomplished; overwhelm the opposition; get it done as fast as possible; and then get the hell out.

The burden of our foreign policies fell heaviest on those we honor on Monday. Some were conscripts. Since the 1970s, all were volunteers. Few had a say in the policies that put them in harm's way or the military strategies they were told to carry out. They did what was asked of them, their duty.

Memorial Day is not about airing differences of opinions over policy and strategy. Its one purpose, common to all, is to make time to thank those who served.

Thank you.

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