

Danville News Column
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“Memorial Day Rememberings”
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Innocent until proven guilty. That’s the American way. Facts will tell whether or not Dominique Strauss-Kahn, head of the International Monetary Fund, is guilty of sexual assault.

But I don’t require a trial to pronounce him guilty of the arrogance of unchecked power. The man deserves being arresting if only for staying in a room that cost \$3,000 a night – and I doubt he was picking up the tab. Why do I feel we were financing his smug pleasures?

Big men know how to be humble. They can enjoy a Motel Six. Great men do not need to show they are one. Here is greatness. The courage of self-examination, the guts to own up to truth and shoulder the judgment of history. Small people recite litanies of excuses or point fingers of blame rather than acknowledge fault. The Big know a sincere apology is strength, not weakness. The Big try to fix what they can. They’re the A students. The rest of us? We’re C students.

Nations too.

Which is the very reason we celebrate Memorial Day. The forgetful treat Memorial Day as a festive holiday. Those who remember honor with grief those who found something and someone worth dying for. With parades, flowers, prayers, we annually remember those in uniform who ran to the gunfire. We’ve casually expanded the circle of this halo to include remembering the deaths of all loved ones. And, yes, sometimes our speeches and bravado confuse it with Veteran’s Day. But authentically, the day is reserved, preserved, for us to remember those who never came home. Regardless of your opinion on the merits (or lack for them) of our current wars, we unite in memorializing those who paid the ultimate price for the decisions of those in power.

Abraham Lincoln defines Memorial Day best. Without excuses, without fake or hollow apologies, he shouldered the dread burden, the responsibility. I quote from the proclamation of March 1863. This comes from a President who never joined a church nor was ever baptized but was a most devout President.

“We have forgotten the gracious hand which preserved us in peace, and multiplied and enriched and strengthened us; and we have vainly imagined, in the deceitfulness of our hearts, that all these blessings were produced by some superior wisdom and virtue of our own. Intoxicated with unbroken success, we have become too self-sufficient to feel the necessity of redeeming and preserving grace, too proud to pray to the God that made us! It behooves us then, to humble ourselves before the offended Power, to confess our national sins, and to pray for clemency and forgiveness.”

We are what we remember. Much of what we try to do with children at church or school is to give birth to a constellation of memories.

Do you remember the names of the first two United States soldiers to die in Operation Iraqi Freedom? Both died on March 21, 2003.

I bet their momma's do. Buddies too.

The first was 2nd Lt. Therrel S. Childers, Harrison County, Mississippi. The son of a Navy Seabee, he wanted to be a Marine since he was five years old. He made it to 30 years old. He was shot in a firefight to secure a Rumaila oil field in southern Iraq.

The second was Lance Cpl. Jose Gutierrez, of Los Angeles, California. Los Angeles was his adopted home. He was an orphan who grew up on the streets of Guatemala City, Guatemala. Jose became an illegal alien at the age of 14, sneaking across the border. He ended in foster care, finally settling in with a family who loved him, themselves immigrants from Costa Rica. Shortly after High School he joined up with the Marines. He made it to 22.

Along with his love of soccer and chess, Gutierrez also enjoyed writing poetry. "Letter to God," a poem he wrote in 2000, was read at his funeral: "Thank you for permitting me to live another year," he wrote in Spanish. "Thank you for what I have, for the type of person I am, for my dreams that don't die. May the firearms be silent and the teachings of love flourish."

He was awarded U.S. citizenship, posthumously.

Lest we forget.

Monday, we gather in humble respect to say, "Thank you." Monday, we gather to say, "We are so very sorry." Monday, we gather to resolve, "We cannot make the past right, but we can become better; in your memory we promise to make it better."