

“They didn’t expect recognition”

Danville News Column

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“Decoration Day”

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Ten years ago I wrote how I had been invited to my hometown library to deliver the concluding talk for their month of seminars on the Civil War. My talk, titled ‘The Meanwhile Men,’ focused on the work of the non-combatants. The Meanwhile Men? Yes, because after the battle, while sergeants and privates sat around campfire and officers enjoyed furloughs, the non-combatants (chaplain, surgeon) meanwhile still had their dirty work. They had a different fight, yet equally hazardous. They used other weapons. For surgeon, the enemy was death, for chaplain, hatred.

Bad as it was for the combat soldiers, it would have been worse were it not for the noncombatants and the volunteer nurses or the Women’s Central Association for Relief which became (against the Army’s resistance) the Sanitary Commission or the Christian Commission providing blankets, literature, fresh food. The Civil War propelled women to enter medical professions.

The Civil War resulted in more than 620,000 dead soldiers. This was 2% of the United States population (2% today would be the entire state of Tennessee). Add to these deaths, 476,000 wounded and 400,000 captured or missing. For the North, battle deaths amounted to 110,070 while death from disease was more than twice that. Same for the South with 164,000 disease deaths compared with 94,000 battle deaths. Cause enough for tears.

Considering the deep religious climate and harshness of daily life, many Civil War era soldiers expected to die. Many were more concerned with an honorable death, the good and noble death. Prayed one confederate soldier: “My first desire should be not that I might escape death but that my death should help the cause of the right to triumph.” What’s sad, pathetic, is that his cause wasn’t a right cause. The Confederacy was wrong, a sickness in America from which we’re still suffering. The soldier may be noble even when the cause is shameful.

My dentist took an x-ray of my teeth, revealing I need a root canal. Diagnostics are useful, even if painful and expensive. Political scientists have offered five symptoms for the decline of nations. When these five symptom appear, the empire (or cause) soon will tumble in disgrace: 1. Fervent religion feeding a national arrogance; 2. Religion impeding science and rational thought; 3. Economic and social polarization and decay (morally and socially); 4. Mindset of an Armageddon time frame, that is, end-time language and a crusader mentality; 5. Dangerous overreach in international commitments and foreign military involvement. I’m suspecting some United States factions could use a root canal.

This weekend we reflect on what Memorial Day is and what it is not. Parades, baseball cards fluttering in bicycle wheels, fire engines, patriotic speeches, and hot dogs are great, so long as we remember it is a day of sad reverence and sober reflection, not a pep rally. My preference is for us to reclaim its original name, Decoration Day, the day for placing flowers on the graves of soldiers. This is a day when our nation counts the cost and evaluates was the cost worth it.

My father wasn’t keen on parading in his World War II uniform (it didn’t fit anyway). They wanted him to go to officer training school. He said: “Why? I’m a sergeant.” He was proud of his military service,

but for himself, he'd rather let it go. It was something they had to do. They didn't expect recognition. There was nothing glorious about it. Maybe the heroes are the ones who would rather not talk about it, the ones who don't want to be called heroes.

We again nod to Bill Mauldin, creator of the Stars and Stripes Willie and Joe cartoons. Mauldin bugged General Patton because Mauldin exposed what war really was like. Mauldin wrote about experiences on the front lines of World War II. "What a stinking business war is, fools glory in it, how all that the soldiers wanted to do was get the job done, go home, and try to forget about it."

Mom described her Memorial Day parades. There came a moment in the parade when everyone was reminded what Memorial Day was about. It was when the mothers, gowned in white, would walk down the street. Everyone would turn quiet, for these were the gold star mothers. Mothers of sons who never returned. Doff your cap out of respect and visit our World War II Memorial. Count how many Montour County sons.

Decoration Day, when our nation cannot forget we had better be worth their sacrifice.