

## Memorial Day Devotional – May 24, 2020

Nelson Cain

### (SLIDE 1) Memorial Day 2020

This is certainly a strange time in America. Memorial Day typically marks the start of the summer season, a time for backyard barbecues and family gatherings, the opening of swimming pools, the start of vacation travel season, trips to national parks and heading to the beach. Last year according to AAA, 43 million Americans traveled for Memorial Day. It was the second-highest travel on record since AAA began tracking in 2000.

But this year is quite different isn't it – these are unprecedented and anxious times. We're in a new era of social distancing, wearing masks in public. We're staying home; avoiding crowds and even avoiding close contact with family members. Our swimming pools remain closed for now and police will be patrolling beaches to enforce social distancing. On Memorial Day the parades have been cancelled and public ceremonies to honor our nation's fallen soldiers have been sharply curtailed.

(SLIDE 2) Every year over Memorial Day weekend, over 142,000 visitors come to Arlington National Cemetery to honor those who are laid to rest in these hallowed grounds. Now Arlington remains closed to the public except for family members.

(SLIDE 3) Those planning to visit one of the 142 national cemeteries run by the Veteran's Administration, which have more than 4.7 million veteran gravesites, may be required to wear face masks, depending on local rules.

(SLIDE 4) Here in Dallas, an hour-long program is usually held at the DFW National Cemetery in observance of Memorial Day. Last year, the event drew a crowd of almost 10,000 people. This year, there will be a private wreath-laying ceremony at the national cemetery which will be streamed online.

Let's pause for a minute during these anxious times; take a deep breath. Let's reflect on this history of Memorial Day and how we got here.

### (SLIDE 5) History of Memorial Day

The history of Memorial Day in the United States is complex, but it started following the Civil War which raged from 1861 – 1865. Look at the faces of these young men from the 23<sup>rd</sup> Ohio Volunteer Infantry and imagine what they must have experienced during the war.

### (SLIDE 6)

Here's a picture of my great-great grandfather William Cain from the 62<sup>nd</sup> Pennsylvania Volunteer infantry. He survived the battle of Gettysburg which claimed over 23,000 Union and 28,000 Confederate casualties over those fateful first three days in July, 1863.

(SLIDE 7)

The Civil War was America's bloodiest conflict. Imagine - Roughly 2% of the population, an estimated 620,000 men, lost their lives in the line of duty. Hundreds of thousands more died of disease. As you can see in this chart, the Civil War represents nearly half of all military losses in American Wars.

(SLIDE 8)

President Abraham Lincoln delivered his Gettysburg Address at the dedication of the Soldiers' National Cemetery in Gettysburg, Pennsylvania, on the afternoon of Thursday, November 19, 1863, just four and a half short months after the horrific battle. Some have therefore claimed that President Abraham Lincoln was the founder of Memorial Day.

The U.S. Department of Veterans' Affairs recognizes that approximately 25 places claim to have originated the holiday.

(SLIDE 9)

One of those places is Boalsburg, Pennsylvania which promotes itself as the birthplace of Memorial Day. There, three young women—Emma Hunter, Sophie Keller and Elizabeth Myers—began the custom of decorating soldiers' graves in 1864, while the Civil War was still being fought.

(SLIDE 10)

They wanted to recognize the contributions of villagers who had paid the ultimate price, and they did it with some homegrown flowers.

(SLIDE 11)

Three years after the Civil War ended, in 1868, General John A. Logan—the head of the Grand Army of the Republic, an organization of Union veterans—established that May 30 should be set aside as Decoration Day, so-called from the tradition of decorating graves with flowers. More than five thousand participants gathered for the first Decoration Day in Arlington National Cemetery and lavished flowers and flags on some twenty thousand graves, and similar events took place in cemeteries all over the country. Many Northern states held similar commemorative events and carried on the tradition in subsequent years; by 1890 each one had made Decoration Day an official state holiday. Southern states, on the other hand, continued to honor their dead on separate days until after World War I.

The commemoration spread more widely in subsequent years and by the 1880s the day was known in some places as Memorial Day, which over the course of the next century became the more common designation. Memorial Day originally honored only those lost while fighting in the Civil War. But during World War I the United States found itself embroiled in another major conflict, and the holiday evolved to commemorate American military personnel who died in all wars, including World War II, The Vietnam War, The Korean War and the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan.

(SLIDE 12)

The Remembrance Day symbolism of the poppy started with a poem called “In Flanders Fields” written by a World War I brigade surgeon who was struck by the sight of the red flowers growing on a ravaged battlefield. Lieutenant Colonel John McCrae, a Canadian who served as a brigade surgeon for an Allied artillery unit, spotted a cluster of poppies that spring, shortly after a major battle in which the Germans unleashed lethal chlorine gas for the first time in the war. Some 87,000 Allied soldiers were killed, wounded or went missing in the battle (as well as 37,000 on the German side)

Published in late 1915, the poem would be used at countless memorial ceremonies, and became one of the most famous works of art to emerge from the Great War.

(SLIDE 13)

The image of the poppy on Memorial Day continued to gain popularity and the National American Legion voted to use the poppy as the official U.S. national emblem of remembrance in September 1920.

(SLIDE 14)

For decades, Memorial Day continued to be observed on May 30, the date that General John Logan had selected for the first Decoration Day. But in 1968 Congress passed the Uniform Monday Holiday Act, which established Memorial Day as the last Monday in May in order to create a three-day weekend for federal employees; the change went into effect in 1971. The same law also declared Memorial Day a federal holiday.

(SLIDE 15)

A decade and a half before Memorial Day became a federal holiday in 1971, Billy Graham was in Boston to deliver a memorial address to the Veterans of Foreign Wars. The year was 1955, and he had just finished visiting many U.S. military installations in Europe. I’ll read a short excerpt of his timeless message, which still rings true this Memorial Day as we remember with gratitude the sacrifices of so many for our nation.

(SLIDE 16)

“As we think of the selflessness and heroism of such fellows, we are reminded of the words of Jesus Christ who said: Greater love hath no man than this, that a man lay down his life for his friends.”  
The freedoms we enjoy, the freedoms we take so much for granted, the freedoms we so often trifle with were bought not by the gold of our millionaires, nor altogether the genius of our scientists, nor the sacrifices of the people at home, but primarily by the blood, sweat and agony of those whose names on this day we honor—those who died that we might live!

They found, as have brave men of all ages, that there are principles well worth dying for. Their noble, unselfish sacrifice is a silent, eloquent rebuke to the self-centeredness of this generation. Let those who want “peace at any price” remember this day that thousands have died for honor and freedom and that what we have today has come at the price of shed blood.”

(SLIDE 17) – Thank you!!