

# Paying respects to war dead on special day

By **BILL BARTELS**

Memorial Day is not a day we wrap up in bunting like the 4th of July. The distinction has to do with what we are celebrating.

It is a day to be remembered with solemnity and reverence. War and the death of our youth, our husbands, our sons, wives,

daughters, mothers and our fathers should never be celebrated. They did not choose to die for us.

However, they did choose for our sake, to place themselves in harm's way, and they died — for us.

The paradox of "why" is too vast for the mind to comprehend. I have concluded that we should leave the understanding of the sacrifice in God's hands. Only He knows the full measure of what was lost, what that loss purchased and whether that loss was worth the gain.

Part of the meaning of Memorial Day is contained in the dry, stark language of statistics: 874,400 Americans served in Vietnam and 46,752 died in battle, including 688 Iowans. another 153,303 Americans were wounded but survived.

In Korea, 33,629 Americans died on the field of battle. Earlier 291,557 of their fathers, uncles or friends died in World War II. Some 53,000 Americans perished in World War I.

In a short war in Panama, the United States suffered 23 deaths

and in the Persian Gulf War, 383 deaths, six of whom were Iowans.

For 224 years — from Valley Forge to Belleau Wood to Omaha Beach to Pork Chop Hill to the Mekong Delta to the desert of the Persian Gulf — 700,000 Americans have died in wartime service.

Monday, Iowans will join other Americans in saluting their memory. These ceremonies will be much like we are having here. Flags will be lowered, bugles will sadly call, rifle volleys will be fired, prayers will be offered, eulogies delivered. The terrible statistics will be added up again, and the roll call of the dead will be read in grateful acknowledgment.

Though Memorial Day was initiated as a special day for decorating the graves of our war heroes, it is equally appropriate to pay homage to the living — nearly 27 million veterans who are our family, our friends, our neighbors. Memorial Day is intended as a time to express our gratitude to those who have kept America and other nations free. Memorial Day is a time to thank God for placing such individuals among us — those who were willing to place their lives in harm's way for the priceless freedom we enjoy today.

Can we lose the freedoms that these men and women fought and died for? Most certainly we can. The loss of that freedom is never more than one generation away.

How can that happen? easily. Just as it happened to ancient Rome. This was a nation that conquered every foreign threat

— that is until the foundation of that nation fractured and fell apart. An industrious society that gradually looked more and more to the government for subsidies. A society that became complacent and gradually more decadent in its morals, values and ethics. A nation that withstood every threat from every enemy outside its borders and decayed and died from within.

One of our greatest responsibilities today is to preserve our freedoms — to ensure that our children will have the same opportunities and quality of life that we savor here today. That we live with the highest sense of ethical values, respect the rights and dignity of all men, and maintain a strong sense of national pride and patriotism.

There is a little uncertainty about America tomorrow. We will be free. We will be strong. We will still be the beacon to the democratic world and the hope for those people whose freedoms are shackled.

That is the gift the fallen left behind. When we pay homage to 700,000 war dead, we hope, like the nation they served and loved, that they are at peace, safe in the knowledge that we will not have let them die in vain.

It is for us to prove that we are worthy of that sacrifice through dedication to the peace that was purchased by the honored dead.

God bless you, and may God continue to bless America.

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