

Memorial Day 2022: America Remembers and Honors Those Who Died While Serving in the Military. For What Did They Die?

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On Memorial Day, America remembers and honors those who died while serving in the military. It is altogether fitting and proper to ask: for what did they die? Do the rationales offered by the military and government officials who decide when and how the US will go to war, and embraced by the public, particularly those who lose loved ones, stand up to scrutiny and analysis? Some will recoil, claiming it inappropriate on a day devoted to honoring the dead. However, it is because war is a matter of life and death, for members of the military and inevitably civilians, that its putative justifications be subject to the strictest tests of truth and the most probing of analyses.

Millions have marched off to war believing they were defending the US, which implies the US was under attack. Yet, setting aside for a moment Pearl Harbor and 9/11, US territory hasn’t been invaded by a foreign power since the Mexican-American War (arguably—Mexico claimed the territory it “invaded” was part of Mexico), or, if the Confederacy is considered a foreign power, the Civil War. That war ended a century-and-a-half ago, yet every US military involvement since has been justified as a defense of the US. That has gradually attenuated, in a little noted slide, to a defense of US “interests,” which is something far different.

Only one of those involvements could, arguably, have been said to have forestalled not an invasion, but a possible threat of invasion: World War II. Watching newsreel graphics of Germany’s drives across Europe, Northern Africa, and the USSR, and Japan’s across Asia and the Pacific, it was perhaps understandable that Americans believed the Axis powers would eventually come for them, especially after Pearl Harbor. However, that was a one-off attack by the Japanese to disable the US’s Pacific Fleet. To launch an invasion of the US, Japan, a smaller, less populated nation whose economy depended on imports of vital raw materials,

including oil, would have had to cross the Pacific and fight the US, and undoubtedly Canada, on their home territories. The Pearl Harbor attack, provoking America's entry into the war, proved a strategic blunder for the Japanese. An invasion would have been ludicrous. Similarly, Germany, up to its eyeballs in a two-front war, couldn't conquer Russian winters or Great Britain across the English Channel. How was it supposed to either cross the Atlantic, or the USSR and hostile guerrillas, then the Pacific, and attack the US? That, too, would have been ludicrous.

The 9/11 attack was also a one-off. A majority of the attackers came not from a US enemy but rather a supposed ally, Saudi Arabia. They received funding and other support from people in that country and perhaps its government. A conventional war against a "state sponsor of terrorism" might have required war against Saudi Arabia; it is still not clear how involved its government was. That option was never considered. Rather, the Bush administration performed metaphysical gymnastics and launched the first war in history against a tactic: terrorism. Although the jihadists who perpetrated 9/11 were self-evidently not the vanguard of an invasion, the terrorism they employed was deemed a threat to US interests in the Middle East, and to life and property in the US. However, none of our subsequent involvements in Afghanistan, Iraq, Syria, Libya, Egypt, and Yemen have been necessary to maintain US citizens' freedoms, the nation's territorial integrity, or its lives and property.

There are undoubtedly many epitaphs on tombstones in this country to the effect: *Here lies the deceased, who died defending America*, and not one that reads: *Here lies the deceased, who died defending American interests*. However, the latter is in most cases more accurate than the former. Who decides the interests for which members of America's military will die? Those considering entering the military today must look beyond the slogans, contemplate the risks of being killed, wounded, dismembered, paralyzed, or psychologically traumatized, and ask themselves: why and for whom are these risks being borne? *You don't fight for your country, you fight for your government*. Is it worth risking one's life for the US government?

In 1821, John Quincy Adams said America had not gone "abroad in search of monsters to destroy," and while we wished those seeking liberty well, theirs was not our fight (see "[In Search of Monsters](#)," SLL, 4/11/15). Since then, America has searched for monsters, found, and in some cases, destroyed them. However, as the poison of power has worked its evil on the minds and souls of those who possess it, the monsters have become more ethereal, apparitions conjured like creatures in the closet by children when they go to bed. The war on terrorism creates more terrorists, the monsters of choice since 9/11. The government still pays occasional lip service to "democratic values" and "civil liberties," but allies itself with regimes which have no more fealty to those values and liberties than the "tyrants" the government opposes. "Defending America" and "Promoting Our Way of Life" have become transparent pretexts for American power and domination unbounded. As Adams so presciently warned, the search for monsters has turned the government itself into a monster, the biggest threat to Americans' "inextinguishable rights of human nature."

Those who have fought and died to defend America and its freedoms are noble beyond measure. Those who pay self-serving tribute to their valor, but make war and expend lives as means to corrupt ends are evil beyond redemption. Honor the former; expose and oppose the latter.

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