

Communications

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UNION VETERANS

AFL-CIO

Memorial Day 2010 Message

Mark H. Ayers

Chairman

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Memorial Day is a time to reflect upon those fallen American heroes who have given their lives and health to keep this nation safe. Memorial Day is also the perfect time to honor those brave soldiers who are still with us, to thank them for the freedoms we enjoy every day, and to do all that we can to improve their quality of life.

But, in many aspects, Memorial Day has simply morphed into the day when we kick into high gear for the summer season.

Yet, I firmly believe that the men and women who died for their nation would fully understand what we do with their day – Memorial Day. Or, at least I hope they would, because if they would have insisted that it be a somber, respectful day of remembrance, then we have blown it big time.

But, you know what? Some of those that I served with, and who paid the ultimate price, would have completely understood.

They liked a sunny beach and a cold beer and a hot barbeque filled to the edges with hot dogs, hamburgers, chicken and ribs. They would have enjoyed nothing more than packing the kids, the jet skis, the coolers, and the suntan lotion in the car and heading for the lake or to the beach. Or, they would have enjoyed it just as much by staying at

home and cutting the grass and getting together with some friends and cooking some steaks on the grill.

But they didn't get the chance. They were ambushed at a mountainside outpost in Afghanistan; or killed by an IED on a road into Fallujah; or they were blown up in the Marine Barracks in Beirut; or they died in the oily waters of the Persian Gulf.

They never made it back from Grenada, in the little war that most folks thought was a joke. They bravely fought until the end in places nobody had ever heard of before – like Khe Sanh and the Mekong Delta. Many died in Korea at Chosin, Inchon, or Pusan. And tens of thousands died in the surf, on the beaches, or in the surrounding fields at Normandy; while just as many fought until the end in the fetid island jungles of the South Pacific.

They died in the ice and snow at Valley Forge, and on the hills of San Juan; as well in the fields of Gettysburg, Antietam and Shiloh.

They couldn't be here with us this weekend, but I think they would understand that we, as Americans, don't spend the day in tears and heart-wrenching memorials. Americans have always been about remembering the past and looking to the future. And our military heroes wouldn't want it any other way. Because, quite frankly, it was the future they were fighting to secure.

Having a nation mired in grief is not why they died. They died so we could go fishing. They died so another father could run and jump with his children into the surf for the very first time. They died so another father could toss a baseball to his son or daughter in their backyard while the charcoal is getting hot.

And they died so their buddies could drink a beer on their day off from work.

They won't mind that we have chosen their day to have our first big outdoor party of the year in their honor. But they wouldn't mind it in the least, either, if we just took one moment to think about, and remember, them.

Many of us, especially those of us who have experienced a painful loss of a loved one in battle, will honor our veterans in a more formal manner. Flowers and flags will decorate gravestones at Arlington and in cemeteries all across the nation. Wreaths will be laid in small, sparsely attended ceremonies at monuments at state capitols and in small towns.

As a nation, we will remember. We will remember all of them. And for those of us who served and who made it back, we will remember the deal we made with our fallen comrades: If one of us doesn't come back, the rest will toast his or her memory.

For the rest of America, they will not necessarily mourn the deaths of our American

heroes on this Memorial Day. Rather, they will celebrate the life and freedoms that these heroes have so unselfishly given to us. I would encourage all Americans—especially those that have not had someone close to them serve in the Armed Forces – to reach out to a Veteran on this Memorial Day and take the time to understand them.

And in so doing, I would ask that all Americans use this reflective time on Memorial Day to ensure that our collective gratitude manifests itself in concrete ways to improve the quality of life for those who have borne the struggles of battle?yet now find themselves struggling to succeed in the civilian world. And that means ensuring that our nation's veterans have access to job training, good jobs and quality health care.

So, as we head into what is arguably the most enjoyable weekend of the year, we hold dear to the words of R.J. Goldlewski, who wrote a profound Memorial Day article entitled, "Those Who've Passed Before Us Haven't Really Left." And those words are:

While you are reflecting upon the price already paid, whenever you come across a person in uniform, kindly extend your hand in gratitude, for you just never know who'll have to pick up the tab the next time that the bill comes around to our table. Enjoy your freedoms, but always – always – know that we're here on lease, not ownership. Someone has to keep making the payments.

May God Bless the United States of America.