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Memorial Day Speech Resources: Fact Sheet

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Introduction

Memorial Day is a day of reflection and remembrance of those who died while serving in the U.S. military. Many Americans observe Memorial Day by visiting cemeteries or memorials and placing wreaths. They may also participate in a Memorial Day parade or hold a family gathering, such as a barbecue. Memorial Day also unofficially marks the beginning of summer.

This guide is designed to assist congressional offices with work related to celebrating Memorial Day.

History

Memorial Day, originally called Decoration Day, began as a day for honoring troops who died during the Civil War. The date and location of the first local observance is disputed. On May 30, 1868, the Grand Army of the Republic, an organization of Union Civil War veterans, called for the first national observance by its members. In 1888, Congress passed an act making May 30 a holiday in the District of Columbia. Memorial Day is now officially observed on the last Monday in May as proscribed in the Uniform Monday Holiday Act.

Legislation

36 U.S.C. §116

Uniform Monday Holiday Act (5 U.S.C. §6103)

National Moment of Remembrance Act (P.L. 106-579)

CRS Reports

The Congressional Research Service has several reports detailing the history of federal holidays and addressing military casualties, including

CRS Report R43539, *Commemorations in Congress: Options for Honoring Individuals, Groups, and Events*, coordinated by Jacob R. Straus.

CRS Report R41990, *Federal Holidays: Evolution and Current Practices*, by Jacob R. Straus.

CRS Report RL32492, *American War and Military Operations Casualties: Lists and Statistics*, by David A. Blum and Nese F. DeBruyne.

CRS In Focus IF10899, *Trends in Active-Duty Military Deaths Since 2006*, by Christopher T. Mann and Hannah Fischer.

CRS Report RS22452, *A Guide to U.S. Military Casualty Statistics: Operation Freedom's Sentinel, Operation Inherent Resolve, Operation New Dawn, Operation Iraqi Freedom, and Operation Enduring Freedom*, by Hannah Fischer.

Sample Congressional Speeches and Recognitions

Members of Congress often make floor statements, issue press releases, or enter Extensions of Remarks into the *Congressional Record* to recognize federal holidays and observances. The following are some recent examples from the *Congressional Record*:

Representative Sheila Jackson Lee, “Memorial Day Tribute Remembering Those Who Gave the Last Full Measure of Devotion,” Extensions of Remarks, *Congressional Record*, daily edition, vol. 167 (May 28, 2021), pp. E589-E590.

Representative Ken Buck, “Recognizing American Heroes on Memorial Day,” Extensions of Remarks, *Congressional Record*, daily edition, vol. 167 (May 28, 2021), pp. E591-E592.

Senator Debbie Stabenow, “Memorial Day,” remarks in the Senate, *Congressional Record*, daily edition, vol. 167 (May 12, 2021), pp. S2481-2482.

Senator Cindy Hyde-Smith, “Memorial Day,” remarks in the Senate, *Congressional Record*, daily edition, vol. 166 (May 21, 2020), pp. S2582-S2583.

Senator Ron Wyden, “Observing Memorial Day,” remarks in the Senate, *Congressional Record*, daily edition, vol. 166 (May 21, 2020), pp. S2576-S2577.

Senator Benjamin L. Cardin, “Memorial Day,” remarks in the Senate, *Congressional Record*, daily edition, vol. 165 (May 23, 2019), pp. S3097-S3098.

Senator John Cornyn, “Memorial Day,” remarks in the Senate, *Congressional Record*, daily edition, vol. 165 (May 23, 2019), pp. S3077-S3078.

Presidential Proclamations

One of the many uses of a presidential proclamation is to ceremoniously honor a group or call attention to certain issues or events. Some recent Memorial Day proclamations, from the *Compilation of Presidential Documents*, include

Presidential Proclamations—Joseph R. Biden, Jr. (2021-)

Presidential Proclamations—Donald J. Trump (2017-2020)

Presidential Proclamations—Barack H. Obama (2009-2016)

Presidential Proclamations—George W. Bush (2001-2008)

Presidential proclamations and remarks from 1993 to the present are available through the govinfo service on the Government Publishing Office website. Earlier remarks are available through The American Presidency Project, established by the University of California, Santa Barbara.

Statistics

The Defense Manpower Data Center provides statistics on active duty military deaths as well as detailed historical tables through the Defense Casualty Analysis System.

Memorial Day is a time to reflect on what veterans have done for the United States. The U.S. Census Bureau tracks statistics about veterans and provides information and visualizations that may be useful to include in speeches.

What Can Americans Do to Participate in Memorial Day?

Part of the Memorial Day observance is the National Moment of Remembrance. All Americans are encouraged to pause wherever they are at 3:00 p.m. local time for a moment of silence to remember and honor those who died in service to the nation.

In many communities, citizens assist veterans with the placement of flags on grave stones in cemeteries and distribute flags to people participating in parades. The American flag may also be flown or hung outdoors at an individual's home.

On Memorial Day, as on Veterans Day, artificial poppies are purchased and the donations are used to help veterans and their widows, widowers, and children.

For additional information on Memorial Day, flag protocol, and veterans cemeteries, see the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs' Memorial Day webpage.

Arlington National Cemetery, "Wreath Layings."

Arlington National Cemetery, "Request a Public Wreath Ceremony."

Library of Congress, "Today in History – May 30." Find more historical resources on the Library of Congress website.

Library of Congress American Folklife Center, "Veterans History Project." In 2016, the Gold Star Families Voice Act (P.L. 114-246) expanded the original scope of the Veterans History Project to include oral histories by immediate family members (parent, spouse, sibling, or child) of "members of the Armed Forces who died as a result of their service during a period of war."

National Archives and Records Administration, "Memorial Day: A Commemoration."

U.S. Army Center of Military History, "Memorial Day."

YouTube videos of wreath laying ceremonies.

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