Opinion
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Gettysburg National Military Park in Gettysburg, Pennsylvania, is seen Aug. 11, 2020. (CNS/Re

Gettysburg National Military Park in Gettysburg, Pennsylvania, is seen Aug. 11, 2020. (CNS/Reuters/Leah Millis)



by Michael Sean Winters

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Walking through Gettysburg National Military Park, it is difficult not to be overcome by emotion as you encounter monument after monument to the different battalions that fought in the 1863 three-day battle that changed the tide of the Civil War. It was here, on this field, the hinge of fate turned. If the Confederate troops had won the battle, the cause of the Union and the abolition of slavery might never have recovered. Here, on this field, marking the geography, recalling the various developments of the battle, you cannot help but realize what a close-run victory it was.

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Some of the monuments honor specific generals, but most honor particular regiments or battalions. These list the hideous totals of those killed or wounded. It was to remember the dead from that war that Decoration Day was first celebrated on May 30, 1868. Every year since, the nation has paused on this day, or the closest Monday, to remember and to honor those who gave "the last full measure of devotion" in that war and in every war since.

At Gettysburg, the soldiers who made the critical difference in the fighting registered the highest casualty rates. The 1st Minnesota monument on Hancock Avenue recalls that 50 men were killed, 173 wounded and one missing out of a total of 420. It was they who plugged the hole in the Union lines into which Confederate General James Longstreet was pouring his troops.

The monument to the 20th Maine Regiment is in a wooded area, reached through a path from the lookout tower at Little Round Top. It was there the brave troops under the command of Colonel Joshua Chamberlain turned back Longstreet's flanking attack. Had the men of Maine not held that line, the Confederate Army would have captured this critical hill, from which they could easily have cannonaded the entire Union line below, and thus won the battle. Of the 386 men who fought in that regiment, 29 were killed, 91 wounded and five were missing. The names of the individual soldiers who died are listed.

People are seen at the World War II Memorial in Washington during Memorial Day May 31, 20

People are seen at the World War II Memorial in Washington during Memorial Day May 31, 2021. (CNS/Tyler Orsburn)

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It is interesting that U.S. monuments to war, with few exceptions, commemorate the fallen, not the war. In Paris, the Arc de Triomphe contains the tomb of the Unknown Soldier, but the Arc was Napoleon's idea, and it was intended to glorify his martial exploits. It lists his victories. Berlin has its Victory Column, begun to celebrate

Prussia's victory in the little-remembered Second Schleswig War but only completed by the time of Prussia's victory over France in 1870-71. The column is forever associated with the unification of Germany that was a result of that victory. The Cenotaph in London is enigmatic: Nothing about it glorifies war really, but it is a national monument, with no attempt to individuate those who fought. The monuments of ancient Rome recall particular emperors, but not individual soldiers.

In the U.S., the obelisks at Bunker Hill and San Jacinto and the World War II memorial in Washington, are exceptional in that they commemorate a war itself, or at least a great battle, and not the soldiers more directly. Perhaps there are others.

Maya Lin's magnificent design for the Vietnam War Memorial best captures the American tradition of remembering the fallen by name. There was great controversy when her plan was unveiled in 1981, as people thought it did not sufficiently glorify the war, the memory of which was still raw both for those who opposed the war and those who fought in it. Lin's genius was to recognize that the location itself was monumental, and that what was needed by all Americans was the ability to see themselves in the tragedy.

Every time I have visited that memorial, I am haunted by my own reflection in the stone, my face obscured by the carved names of the dead. The monument very quickly became beloved by Vietnam veterans and the families of the fallen. The controversy over the memorial, but not the war, subsided. The monument, too, helped remind all Americans that whatever their thoughts on the war, it was wrong to blame the soldiers who served in it.

A U.S. flag leans against the names of U.S. soldiers who died in Vietnam at the Vietnam War m

A U.S. flag leans against the names of U.S. soldiers who died in Vietnam at the Vietnam War memorial in Washington. (CNS/Cleo)

Our little town of 1,700 souls will hold its annual parade this morning. There will be a few floats on flatbed trucks, the band from the regional high school, some old cars and the fire trucks from our volunteer fire company. A short ceremony in front of the town hall will feature a few patriotic songs and a short speech, a wreath is placed at the town's monument listing those who served, we will applaud the veterans who attend and recall the one soldier from our town who was lost: Leslie Jewett died in Normandy during Operation Overlord. The town's American Legion post is named for

him. Later, a wreath will be thrown into Little River to honor those who fought and died in the Navy.

Memorial Day should be somber. It may include a family or town BBQ to be sure, but at some point during the day, we Americans owe it to those who gave their lives in the service of the country to remember them. Whatever we thought of the wars in which they fought, we should honor their sacrifice. Like most of our nation's monuments, we should remember them as individuals whose lives were cut short because they answered their nation's call. And we can say a prayer that the scourge of war will never visit our nation, or any nation, again.