Opinion

NCR Voices



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



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Memorial Day is no longer really about memory, at least not for most of us.

We honor our veterans, who lead the parade down Main Street, but they are so few, like the members of the horticultural society or the Boy Scouts who also march in the parade. If we know the veterans and their stories, it is likely by happenstance. Movies about Vietnam or Iraq and Afghanistan play on Turner Classic Movies, if at all. Tales of that long war are narrowcast, not broadcast, on the History Channel or in books that sell a few thousand copies.

My parents' generation remembered World War II differently.

Everyone went to war back then, the soldiers in the field, and the working men and women in the factories. Rationing changed the way people cooked and lived. Few families did not have an extended family member who fought in Normandy or the Battle of the Bulge or Iwo Jima. The memories were vivid and shared. They defined that generation as "the greatest" and the sobriquet fit. Theirs was a generation of intense solidarity, shared goals and shared sacrifices.

When the U.S. Holocaust Memorial Museum was dedicated in 1993, Leon Wieseltier penned a splendid essay entitled "After Memory" in which he evaluated the competing claims and approaches of memory and history:

> Memory, in sum, is not only authentic, and radiant, and poetic. It is also hurtful, and fragile ("who, after all," asked Hitler, "speaks today of the annihilation of the Armenians?"), and, in a strict sense, untransmittable. Therefore it needs the fortifyings of history: the corrections, the comparisons, the conclusions. (Memory is color, history is line.) The first of many accomplishments of the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, which opens this week on the Mall in Washington, is the paradox of its name: a memorial museum, a house of memory and history. Here the vividness of recollection joins the sturdiness of research. The stinging subjectivity of the testimonies of the survivors is met in these galleries by the tart objectivity of photographs, films, maps, statistics and objects.

I fear that my generation has bequeathed few and isolated memories of the sacrifices of the men and women who have worn the uniform of the country in our day. In no meaningful sense did the rest of the country share their goals or their sacrifices. The "stinging subjectivity" of the warriors is mostly unheard. The long ordeal of the Cold War recedes into the warm, fuzzy realization that our side won. War is disconnected from the important cultural wellsprings of our society.

Across Cambridge Street from Harvard Yard is Memorial Hall, a large neo-Gothic structure that was built to commemorate the sacrifice of Harvard men in the Civil War. The marble tablets list the 136 Harvard men who died during that war. It seems like a small number, but in the mid-19th century, very few young men went to university. Harvard's graduating class of 1865 counted only 77 seniors.

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On Armistice Day 1932, Harvard dedicated Memorial Church. The inscription over the entrance reads, "In grateful memory of the Harvard men who died in the World War we have built this Church."

Three hundred and seventy-three names of those killed during the Great War, including those of women attending Radcliffe College, were listed in stone behind a sculpture known as "The Sacrifice," which portrays a dead soldier, his head cradled by a grieving woman.

In World War II, more than 24,000 Harvard students or alumni served in the military and 697 of those were killed and memorialized on the walls of the Memorial Church.

The memorial plaque for Harvard students or alumni killed during the Vietnam War lists 22 names.

This is not a mark of societal health. The specialization of labor is one thing but the hiring out of national purpose is another.

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The all-volunteer army is celebrated, and it certainly has benefits. Still, drawing membership in the armed forces by lot, with no college deferments, guaranteed that all sectors of society participated meaningfully in the war effort. Today, our cultural elites have opted out of the arduous task of defending the country militarily. The future titans of our times will make their mark on Wall Street, not in battle. They fight for personal wealth, not national or civilizational interests.

More importantly, the brutal work — and often dire consequences — of engaging in battle are left to other people's children. No one should be surprised when the mass of the people turn their backs on cultural elites.

God willing, there will be no more wars, but as long as there are, the whole nation should fight them. Class distinctions should not matter. Social solidarity requires nothing less.