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The altar of freedom

By Congressman Joe Pitts

This year, Memorial Day carries special significance. Nearly 150 Americans, several from the Keystone State, died during fighting in Iraq. They follow the somber example of the brave men and women who gave their lives in our nation's previous wars.

And this year we follow the example of those who, over the last 135 years, have taken this day to honor those who have laid upon the altar of freedom the ultimate sacrifice for us.

On May 5, 1868 General John A. Logan, the national commander of the Grand Army of the Republic, declared May 30th as the day to honor the nation's fallen heroes. Originally intended to honor Civil War casualties, the holiday has grown into a day to honor our fallen soldiers from all our nation's wars.

By May 30, 1884, most states recognized the holiday. And it was on this day in Keane, New Hampshire that Oliver Wendell Holmes rose to address the John Sedgwick Post No. 4 of the Grand Army of the Republic.

Himself a Civil War veteran wounded three times, Holmes was the Chief Justice of the Massachusetts Supreme Court at the time. The address given that day by the future Supreme Court Justice still ranks among this nation's great speeches and was the first public address given by "the most quotable of judges" not concerning a matter of the law.

His speech instead centered on his response to a young man who wondered why people still celebrated Memorial Day.

The essence of his response was that, "it celebrates and solemnly reaffirms from year to year a national act of enthusiasm and faith. It embodies in the most impressive form our belief that to act with enthusiasm and faith is the condition of acting greatly."

No doubt inspired by his experiences in war and the memories of fallen friends, Holmes believed that Memorial Day is meant to capture the inspiration behind the sacrifice our heroes have made on the field of battle. It is a day to reaffirm our belief that great deeds are indeed done with enthusiasm and faith as their motivation. And that those great deeds were done by those we love.

Those we honor today have been the source of our nation's greatest natural resource. They have provided the enthusiasm and courage to make this nation great. And their courage took them into the line of fire in defense of freedom, never to return. And never to wear the proud title of "veteran."

President Lincoln wrote a memorable letter during the Civil War. Mrs. Bixby of Massachusetts had lost five sons during the war, and the President was so moved by her story that he personally wrote a letter of consolation to her.

He told Mrs. Bixby: "I pray that our Heavenly Father may assuage the anguish of your bereavement, and leave you only the cherished memory of the loved and lost, and the solemn pride that must be yours to have laid so costly a sacrifice upon the altar of freedom."

Over the last two centuries, our country has been both the inspiration and the product of great acts of enthusiasm and faith. From its very beginning we were a country built on the ideals of virtue, individual liberty and the rule of law.

But our desire for liberty has always been infused with the will to fight all who threaten to deprive us of it. From Bunker Hill to Gettysburg, Iwo Jima to Baghdad this day is a reminder of the costly sacrifice laid upon the altar of freedom so that we might live in peace. A reminder of families like the Bixbys who sacrificed so much to preserve our country and our freedom.

So as we honor our fallen heroes today, our prayers should also be with the families who "have laid so costly a sacrifice upon the altar of freedom."

This Memorial Day, amidst the picnics and family gatherings, we honor those who gave the ultimate sacrifice and their families.

Congressman Joe Pitts is a veteran of the United States Air Force. After three tours in Vietnam as an Electronic Warfare Officer aboard a B-52, he retired as a Captain in 1969. He is a member of the Veterans of Foreign Wars Post 5467 in Kennett Square, Pennsylvania.

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