

NEWS ADVISORY

Committee on International Relations

U.S. House of Representatives

Henry Hyde (R-IL), Chairman

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Hyde Honors our Nation's Veterans

WASHINGTON, D.C. – U.S. Representative Henry J. Hyde (R-IL), Chairman of the House International Relations Committee, made the following remarks in honor of Veterans Day:

The United States Congress officially recognized November 11th first as "Armistice Day" by passing a concurrent resolution on June 4, 1926. A clause in that resolution stated that, "Whereas the 11th of November 1918, marked the cessation of the most destructive, sanguinary, and far-reaching war in human annals and the resumption by the people of the United States of peaceful relations with other nations, which we hope may never again be severed." Our country suffered over 53,000 battle deaths in the First World War. It was fitting and proper to officially recognize the sacrifice of those who served. Subsequent legislation passed by Congress on May 13, 1938, designated November 11th as a legal holiday.

World War I, as terrible a conflict as it was, proved not to be "the war to end all wars." The United States entered an even more horrific conflict a little more than two decades later on that day of infamy – December 7, 1941. Battle deaths in the Second World War were almost six times as many as had fallen in World War I -- over 293,000. In recognition of this fact, the 83rd Congress in 1954 amended the 1938 Act by striking the word "Armistice" and inserting the word "Veterans." The holiday was now meant to honor veterans of all wars, including those who had served in the Second World War and in Korea.

Still, the American public retained an emotional attachment to the symbolism of November 11th – as children learned in history books at school that the First World War came to an end "on the eleventh hour of the eleventh day in the eleventh month." When legislation designated to maximize the number of three-day holiday weekends was passed in the 1960s to move Veterans Day to the second Monday in November, there was a public uproar. In response, President Ford signed legislation in 1975 returning Veterans Day to its original November 11th date.

Another symbol of the First World War was the sales of poppies by American veterans' groups on Memorial Day, or "Poppy Day." That custom was continued in the United Kingdom, Canada and Australia on the November 11th holiday known as "Remembrance Day." The poppies, of course, call to mind the immortal words of Lieutenant Colonel John McCrae, a Canadian doctor and poet of the First World War: "In Flanders Fields the poppies blow between the crosses, row on row." The doctor himself died in 1918 of diseases he caught in a field hospital.

Symbols, such as poppies, and dates, like November 11th, stand as important reminders in our national consciousness of the sacrifices of those who have gone before us. Would Americans cling so strongly to the memory of our Revolutionary struggle and of the courage of our Founding Fathers – Washington, Franklin, Adams and Jefferson – without the annual reminder provided by the Fourth of July holiday? The Revolutionary War, our Nation's greatest military struggle of the 18th Century, is thus commemorated annually. Memorial Day first came into being in the 1860s as both Union and Confederate women placed wreaths at the tombs of fallen soldiers on what

was

then called "Decoration Day." Thus, Americans still annually honor sacrifices reaching back to the Civil War, our Nation's greatest conflict of the 19th Century, in the commemorations on Memorial Day.

That leaves the greatest conflict of the Twentieth Century, alone, in lacking some form of official recognition. While movies such as "Saving Private Ryan" and "Flags of Our Fathers" remind younger generations of the sacrifices of the Second World War, the memories are slowly fading. Those who are members of what has been called "The Greatest Generation" are increasingly passing from the scene. World War II veterans are estimated to be dying at a rate of one thousand per day.

August 15, 1945 was the "Armistice Day" of the Second World War. On that date, V-J Day, the guns finally fell silent after years of war. In that famous Times Square photo, the sailor kissing the pretty girl he'd never met symbolized the general euphoria of both our Nation and the entire world. But the hurrahs soon fell silent as we faced the stark realities of the Cold War. It took the quiet, roll-up-your-sleeves-and-get-the-job-done Greatest Generation fifty-nine years to get its own World War II Memorial on the National Mall.

To remember and appreciate the sacrifices our military have made is the least we can do on Veterans Day. Our gratitude requires the fullest expression if we are to be worthy of their sacrifice.

This last August 15th drew scant public attention. I traveled with a Congressional Delegation to Guadalcanal to lay a modest wreath there to those who had fallen in that horrific battle. But the world took little note of this important date, and there were few other commemorations. Perhaps now is finally the time for Congress to consider designating August 15th as a national holiday. People may then remember to say, even if the Republic lasts for one thousand years, that this date was America's finest hour.

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